



# Highlander Uncovered

A SCOTTISH TIME TRAVEL ROMANCE

REBECCA PRESTON

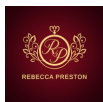
# Highlander Uncovered

## A Scottish Time Travel Romance



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About Rebecca Preston

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Audra had never felt as disoriented in all her life as she did when she woke up on the plane to Glasgow International.

She'd never been on a long-haul flight before, for a start. The furthest she'd ever traveled was to the next state over, visiting family in West Virginia — and nobody would ever bother getting a plane from Ohio to West Virginia. No, they'd driven, a long, sleepy drive... but absolutely nothing like this. She'd felt like a child, climbing aboard the enormous aircraft, craning her neck to get a proper look at it — while simultaneously feeling embarrassed to be gawking like that when everyone around her seemed so comfortable with the plane, with the whole situation. It made her feel immature, naive, juvenile...

Then again, she had led kind of a sheltered life, hadn't she? That was a big part of why she wanted to do what she was doing, what had motivated her to apply for the holiday program. A summer abroad ... well, not really a summer. She would have liked to be going for the whole summer, but as always, her parents had put their foot down. One month was more than enough time to be spending abroad... any longer and she'd be at risk of God knew what kind of ... what, exactly? She never knew exactly what it was that her parents were protecting her from. When she'd been little, she'd accepted it without question. She'd always been a frail, sickly child, easily hurt, easily falling ill... and her parents knew best, didn't they? But that had begun to change as she'd gotten older and outgrown her sickly youth at least, the illness part — she never really had caught up with the other children when it came to growing tall or broad.

At age eighteen she'd made her first major stand against their controlling influence, and put her foot down about wanting to go to college. Even that had been a major compromise, in the end. She'd wanted to go across the country to study at a college with a better reputation, but her mother and father had refused point blank. The argument had raged for weeks, turning their pleasant suburban home



into a battleground... but Audra had held firm. She wanted to study, she wanted to be an architect... and her parents couldn't tell her that it wasn't a good career, not with the way her mother had always carried on about how important an education was, and not with her father making his career in construction. He was always making casual reference to how much architects got paid.

So, in the end, they'd found their compromise — she'd enrolled in an undergraduate program at a local state college, not the college halfway across the country, as she'd wanted. She'd live at home, her mother insisted, to cut down on the obscene student debt she was going to rack up... and of course, that would allow her mother and father to keep a close eye on her. Everyone was happy, right? Absolutely not, Audra had thought, her jaw tight... but she knew her parents well, and she knew that this was just about the best kind of compromise she was going to get from them. So, she'd smiled and agreed.

At least she was at college. At least she was studying. It was slow going, of course, and part of her was chafing at the fact that she could be getting a lot more done at another college... but that was for the future. She was two years into her undergraduate program now, and already impressing all her teachers with her discipline, her commitment, her focus. Her grades were exemplary... something she made an effort not to brag about to her parents, who at any rate didn't seem that interested. Audra made a point of letting her parents think she was getting good grades — not great, but good. If they knew how well she was doing, they might catch wise to her master plan... which was to transfer to a college across the country as soon as she turned twenty-one.

That was a while away, though. She was looking at this trip as a kind of preparatory venture — it would be the first time she'd been away from her parents' home for more than a night, after all. If she could do this, she knew in her bones that she'd be okay to move across the country to study — to get a real qualification that would get her work in her field, that would make the most of her blossoming talent. It was scary, to make such a big wager on herself... but she'd known ever since she was little that her parents were always going to try to keep her safe and sound at home.

She didn't resent them for it, exactly — though she knew most of her friends felt very differently about the oppressive presence of Mr. and Mrs. Kendall in their only daughter's life. Her friends just saw monsters — oppressive, forceful monsters who insisted on knowing exactly where she was every minute of her life. But Audra knew them a little better than that — knew the side of them her friends didn't see, the fear that underpinned every single controlling action. It came from

fear of losing her, that was all. They were only doing their best to be good parents... and knowing that meant she could forgive all their controlling impulses, no matter how exasperating.

Because they'd let her go away, hadn't they? First college, then this trip. She'd gotten the idea six months ago, from a poster that had been stuck up in one of her classrooms. Working holidays for students — a way to see the world on a tight budget, and even come back with a bit more cash than you left with, so long as you were frugal on your trip which, she'd quickly learned, very few participants of the program actually were. The way it worked was that you applied, with your resume — and the organization matched you to a place abroad that needed workers for the summer. Flights and accommodation were covered out of whatever wage you earned, and your free time was yours to do with as you wished.

She hadn't believed she'd get it when she first applied. The program was always very popular, especially with students, and everyone at the information session seemed to have years of experience in something or other — in working in bars, or serving at cafes, or working in hotels — all highly sought after skills, it seemed. All Audra had was the free time required, so she hadn't had high hopes when she'd put in her application. But to her delight, she'd received an offer only a few weeks later to work in a hotel somewhere in Scotland. It seemed they'd picked her as an architecture student — the hotel in question was a restored manor from the medieval era, very popular among history buffs and the like, and they were interested in taking on staff who knew a little about the building itself.

The work itself was nothing special — general housekeeping assistance, cleaning rooms and helping check guests in and out — but Audra didn't care. Scotland... it sounded like another planet, not just another country. All the way across the ocean... for a girl of nineteen who'd only left her home state once or twice, it was impossible to imagine. But the more research she did, the more she looked at pictures and watched videos and documentaries about the country, the more her excitement grew and grew.

And so she'd prepared, like a general going into battle, to ask her parents for permission to go.

Not that she needed it, technically... she was an adult, after all. Gone were the days of high school, when she'd needed them to sign a permission form. But Audra loved her parents. Controlling, yes, exasperating, frequently... but she loved them, and she wanted them to be as happy as she was about the prospect of this trip. So she'd prepared carefully. It helped, of course, that her twentieth birthday was shortly after she'd received her letter of offer... so she'd sat her parents down at her birthday dinner and calmly explained what she

wanted as a gift.

It had been a long conversation... not nearly as unpleasant as the initial argument about university, but grueling in its own way. Still, in the end she'd gotten what she'd wanted. They'd agreed to let her go — but only once they'd argued her down from three months to one month thankfully, the program had some flexibility regarding dates. A month was more than enough, she told herself later that night when she breathed a sigh of relief. Her parents had agreed to let her go... agreed, even, with her assertion that it would be good for her to spend some time by herself, to see a little of the world now that she was growing up.

Of course, she hadn't been prepared for the absolute onslaught of nagging that was about to commence. In the six months since she'd accepted the offer, she'd received more than her fair share of lectures from her mother about keeping herself safe from foreigners... and a terrifying insight into the kind of fear with which her slight, frail mother lived her life. It seemed that danger lurked around every corner... she was constantly printing out lists of 'safety tips' from the Internet and leaving them on Audra's pillow, quizzing her the next day to make sure she'd thoroughly digested them. Her father had even insisted on teaching her a little self-defense, taking her out into the yard of their suburban home and embarrassing the hell out of her as he put her through her paces — how to throw a punch, how to disable a man who was attacking her and get the hell out of there.

A lot of it was focused on men, she'd noticed. It wasn't that she was that naive — she knew that the world was dangerous, especially for a slight woman like her who barely cleared five feet and had always had a childlike, fragile energy. She wasn't blind to the way men looked at her in public, the leering glances she occasionally earned... there was a reason she dressed as modestly as she did, a reason she avoided eye contact whenever she could, a reason she stayed close to her female friends, especially at night... but her parents seemed to see the world in an even more terrifying light than she did. Especially her mother. The night before her flight left, she'd found her mother sitting in the living room in tears, looking at an old photo album. It had made her heart ache, looking at her mother, knowing how much anguish she was going through on Audra's account... and for a brief, dizzying moment, she'd resolved to cancel the whole trip, to stay here with her mother and father for the whole summer.

But she couldn't do that. She was already too sheltered, too naive for the kind of life she wanted to live. She needed to learn who she was outside of her family's smothering embrace, needed to spread her wings and fly. So, she'd slipped away upstairs and finished packing her suitcase, steeling herself against the sound of her mother's soft

weeping.

She was going to Scotland. It was only a month. And who knew? Maybe her parents would find the month as educational as Audra would.

She blinked blearily around the cabin as she woke from a restless

sleep, her dreams haunted by the sound of her mother's voice. It had been a rather fraught drive to the airport... it seemed that her mother had been saving all her most unhinged safety tips until last. Her final instruction was to buy a box of cookies once she reached her accommodation, to place one under the doormat every day, and to check whether it was broken every morning when she got up — that was how she'd know if someone had been standing at her door in the night, trying to get in. Audra had promised to do it, more to put her mother's mind at rest than because she actually intended on doing it. Her father had been grim and stoic — though when he'd hugged her goodbye at the gate, he'd whispered a quick reminder of the correct way to throw a punch in her ear, revealing his own fear of her getting hurt.

"Call right away when you get there," her mother said breathlessly as she headed for the plane that would take her halfway across the world. "And never forget how much we love you."

At least they'd parted on a pleasant note... although when she'd taken her phone out on the airplane to put it in flight mode, she'd found ten text messages from her mother, all sent in the last two minutes, with further safety tips, threats, and entreaties about how to keep herself from harm... exasperated, she'd texted a quick 'love you, talk soon' and switched her phone off for good.

And here she was... sitting on the plane, just about to land in a foreign country. She stretched her neck a little, wincing at how stiff her body felt after nearly half a day in the air. The woman sitting next to her flashed her a commiserating little smile — she seemed like a seasoned traveler, with a handbag full of snacks, a neck pillow and even some little alcohol wipes she'd shared with her before the meals had been served, warning her that it was easy to catch a cold from all the germs that tended to linger on an airplane. There was paranoid

advice, like the kind her parents shared with her... and then there was good sense. Audra had always had a decent sense of how to tell the difference, and she'd thanked the woman warmly for helping keep her safe.

Still... part of her chafed at yet another gesture of assistance from yet another well-meaning older person. She'd spent her whole damn life under her parents' strict supervision — she wanted to start learning, start making her own mistakes, start getting to grips with the world on her own. So, when the plane finally landed, she thanked the woman again, then let a breath out as she left the plane.

The airport was hectic, but Audra didn't let herself get overwhelmed. She wasn't going to fall at the first hurdle, wasn't going to let herself panic just because the place was busy and crowded with all kinds of strange people, speaking a dozen different languages with a hundred different accents as she made her way through the crowd... she almost forgot to go and pick up her checked baggage, but she remembered just in time, biting her lip as she hastened toward the baggage claim.

And then she had her bag, and she was out of the airport and searching for the bus that she knew had been arranged to collect her and a bunch of other student workers from the airport and bring them up to the north of Scotland, where the manor was where she'd be working. She found it eventually after more than one slightly panicky phone call with the bus driver, whose accent was so thick she had trouble making out what he was saying on the phone and settled down in the back, feeling exhausted, jetlagged, overwhelmed... and happier than she'd been in years.

Everyone else on the bus seemed about as exhausted as she felt, which made her smile a little. She wasn't feeling especially social right now and had been worried that everyone would be chatty and gregarious on the bus... but as the bus started rolling out of the airport, she realized with a sigh of relief that the majority of the passengers seemed determined to get a bit of much-needed rest on this bus trip. That was good. It was mid-morning, so she tried to resist the urge to fall asleep herself... but she couldn't help but be lulled into a half-dozing state by the steady rocking of the bus beneath her, the warmth of the engine and the dull roar of traffic.

When she came back to herself, she realized with a start that they were well out of the city — nothing but trees were flicking past outside her window, and she peered through the glass, fascinated by the difference between the countryside out there and her own home state of Ohio. Everything back home was so different...of course Ohio had hills, and cliffs, and valleys, but here the grass seemed greener, and the hills higher, and the valleys lower. She hoped that she was up

to traversing the landscape here, because it was so beautiful and she wanted to be out enjoying it. The photos she'd seen of Weatherby Manor suggested that it was positioned on a reasonably flat piece of countryside though, so she didn't think she'd have to work too hard.

She was so fascinated with the view that she completely forgot that she'd promised to phone her mother the minute she touched down... the thought occurred to her with a dizzying lurch, and she reached into her bag for her phone, panic surging in her chest... and only solidifying when she realized with a grimace that her phone's battery was completely dead. Well — nothing for it now. Her mother was just going to have to wait until she'd reached the hotel... trying to put aside the anxiety that she felt deep in her core at having already disobeyed one of her mother's instructions, she looked out the window, trying not to let herself panic. She'd make up an excuse — say that her phone had died on the plane, maybe, and that she couldn't have called her if she'd tried...

Irritation flared. She'd just arrived in a brand-new country, and all she could do was freak out about what her parents thought? No way. She was here to learn how to be by herself — that meant cutting the cord that had always tied her so tightly to her parents. They could freak out all they wanted. She was here, she was safe... and honestly, it might do them some good not to hear from her for a little while. Gritting her teeth, she glanced around the bus, trying to find someone or something to distract her from her worries... but unlike her, everyone seemed to be asleep.

Her eyes traced the face of a rather good-looking young man, his jacket bundled up into a makeshift pillow that his face was pressing against the window of the bus. She'd never been allowed to date when she was living at home... it had been strictly forbidden when she was in high school, with her mother making a series of dark comments about teenaged pregnancies that had made her rather naive high-school-aged-self assume that pregnancy was something that could come about if you so much as looked at a boy the wrong way. She'd assumed that once she was out of high school, she'd be allowed to see boys... but that particular rule change never came about, not explicitly anyway, and she was too frightened of the withering look she'd no doubt receive from her mother to ever actually bring it up.

Well, her mother wasn't here now to judge her. She was an adult, she was halfway across the world, she'd have her own little room to herself and her own space... maybe there'd be a cute boy at the hotel, another staff member, maybe, or even a guest. A summer fling... she'd read about those, always feeling one part guilty, one part jealous. Nothing too crazy, of course... just a bit of flirtation. Practice, maybe, for the real thing one day... then again, who was to say she wouldn't

meet the love of her life over here? Maybe she'd fall for some Scottish boy and move here forever. She could be an architect in Scotland, right?

Grinning to herself at such bold thoughts, she settled more comfortably in her seat, deciding to spend the rest of the afternoon sleeping. There was to be a meet and greet for all the new staff once everyone had arrived at Weatherby Manor that evening, and she wanted to get a bit of rest before then, to make sure she was at least vaguely coherent when she met the people that she'd be spending the month with.

She ended up waking about twenty minutes before they arrived at the manor — the bus driver was speaking into his little microphone up front, telling them something that she couldn't quite make out. Something about a Keep — it sounded like he was recounting something of historical interest, and she peered out through the window as the rest of the passengers seemed to be doing, bleary but curious. Sure enough, there was some kind of ruin up on the hill they were driving past... and as the bus driver spoke, her eyes widened. It was a Scottish castle, he was telling them — or it had been once, long ago, before it had fallen to the ravages of age and time. There it stood, still proud on the hillside — it had once been much taller, of course, and she found herself imagining what it had been like in its prime, looming up against the sky...

A shiver ran down her spine, for some reason. How strange, to be in a country with castles. Of course, her own country had been inhabited for thousands of years, too... but in terms of permanent buildings, well, their history was quite short, wasn't it? To think that there had been castles being built here, centuries before her ancestors had even left their shores to start a new life in America... well, it was disorienting, to say the least.

They arrived at Weatherby Manor just before dark, and she realized with a smile that everyone on the bus was just as excited to be here as she was. She'd been worried that she'd be the most sheltered one on the trip, the most excited over small things — but every other face she looked at was as full of delight and wonder as hers was when they pulled up in front of the picturesque old manor. It was just how it had looked in all the brochures she'd pored over in the lead-up to her trip — the sunset light danced from its lovingly restored facade, and she couldn't help but gasp in wonder. The stables had been restored, too, and refitted as garages for guests to park their cars in... the bus pulled up in front of the manor, ten feet from the stables, and they all began to pile off the bus.

There was a business-like woman with a clipboard and a lanyard who Audra realized almost immediately must be in charge of the



situation — she was delegating people left right and center, telling each and every passenger from the bus which part of the servants' quarters they would be inhabiting. That had tickled Audra, when she'd first read about it — that she'd be living in the actual restored servants' quarters that the manor had had since it was first built, sometime in the sixteenth century — but right now, all she cared about was putting her stupidly heavy suitcase somewhere so she could stop worrying about it for a while. A hot shower sounded incredible, too, especially after nearly forty hours in transit.

Still, she couldn't help but linger in the courtyard, gazing up at the facade of Weatherby Manor with a fond smile lingering on her face. There was something about this trip, about being here, that just felt... well, right. She felt like she was where she was supposed to be.

And she supposed that over the next month, she'd find out exactly what that feeling meant.

There was just enough time to drop her bags and drag herself

into the shower to scrub the grime of her long trip from her body before Maggie as the businesslike woman with the clipboard had introduced herself was bustling up and down the corridor, barking at them that dinner would be served in half an hour and punctuality was strongly encouraged. Grinning to herself, Audra ran a comb through her damp dark hair. It always looked so much longer when it was wet — darker, too, than its usual light brunette. It was always curly, when it dried. For a while in high school, she'd gone to the effort of straightening it every day, but she'd since embraced the natural curl. Difficult to manage sometimes, sure... but it was a lot healthier since she'd stopped flat-ironing it every morning.

She got changed, too, slipping into a dress she'd always kept hidden from her parents — without a cardigan on, it was a little racier than her mother generally accepted, with a neckline that stopped just below her collarbones. By normal standards, it was quite prudish — it was about fifty miles from revealing any cleavage, for a start — but her parents had never really had normal standards, had they? Ever since she'd packed it, she'd been looking forward to an excuse to wear it — and to wear it properly, without a cardigan buttoned up to her throat to disguise the fact that she had skin below her neck.

Feeling cute, and a lot less jetlagged than she had felt on the bus, Audra headed out to join the rest of the staff for their orientation session.

It took the form of a quick meal in the communal dining hall — she wolfed down the food gratefully, realizing that she hadn't eaten anything since the plane — and then a thorough tour of the inside of the hotel. The manor proper was where the guests stayed — it had a maximum capacity of about fifty guests and tended to reach that capacity regularly throughout the summer. They were also given their uniforms — three each, to be washed on a regular schedule, with two

days a week their appointed days off when they could wear the casual clothes that they'd brought with them. Audra had been amused by the uniforms — they were as demure as could be, with lace at the throat and skirts that fell to the ankles. She had a suspicion that the uniforms which she'd quickly shown to her parents when she read about them were a big part of her getting permission to take this job.

She headed back to her room after orientation, feeling a little overwhelmed still... but very much looking forward to her first shift the following day. There were no guests yet, thankfully — they had a few days set aside for training before the hotel opened to guests for the summer, which would give them plenty of time to get to know the place better. After all, they'd need to be authorities on the place, to answer questions whenever the guests might have them — whether those questions were about finding the bathrooms, or about the history of the place.

But Audra's good mood evaporated almost immediately when she got back to her room. It was a tiny room, not much more than a single bed and a chest of drawers for her belongings, but there was a lock on the door for which she had the only key, and that alone was more privacy than she'd ever had in her life. But she should have known better than to get too complacent about her privacy. When she picked up her phone — which she'd quickly plugged in to charge before jumping into the shower, then forgotten about — it was to find no less than twenty missed calls from her mother... and a blistering stream of texts that made it clear that her mother had been tracking every inch of her journey from all the way back in Ohio.

Her feeling of safety and freedom vanished as though it had never been there — replaced by the permanent, crippling feeling that she was never going to get away from her mother as long as she lived. Gritting her teeth, she hit play on the messages... and almost as quickly, hung up on her inbox, panic and frustration warring with each other. She should have called earlier... no, she told herself firmly. She was an adult. Her mother could deal with this. Still... she hastened to call her mother back, gritting her teeth as she prepared for the influx of recrimination.

Sure enough, her mother was furious — she could hear tears in her voice as she scolded her at length, going over every detail of her itinerary as though the gap between her getting off the plane and arriving at the manor was evidence that she'd already gone astray, that she'd forgotten all of the love she'd ever had for her parents. Audra tried once or twice to get a few words in edgewise — usually her mother was better than her father about actually letting her speak — but the more she tried, it seemed, the more her mother had to say. It was like a fountain of recrimination that she couldn't find the off

switch for... and the more she listened, the more panic rose in her. Panic that quickly gave way to anger as she sat down on the edge of her bed, gritting her teeth as she listened to her mother rage and rail about how disrespectful she had been.

This wasn't fair, was it? Her mother, all the way on the other side of the world, screaming at her as though she'd done something awful — not just gotten off the plane and not realized until it was too late that her phone was nearly out of battery. Screaming and screaming... she could hear her father in the background, too, occasionally interjecting his own contributions, and she realized grimly that the two of them weren't going to take this trip as an opportunity to grow and change, to accept that she was her own person with her own life. No — if anything, this was going to end up being further justification for controlling her life even more, for supervising and restricting and domineering her... she'd be thirty before she was allowed to so much as go to the grocery store unaccompanied.

She couldn't do it. An eerie clarity took hold of her and she took a deep, steadying breath. Part of her wanted to just hang up the phone and be done with it... but she knew that wouldn't stop her mother from sending more voicemails, more messages, until her phone was absolutely drowned. She needed to speak her mind. She needed to tell her off.

"Mom — shut up," she snapped, finding a stronger voice in the depths of her chest than she'd ever known she'd had. "Shut up for five minutes and let me talk." She knew she'd only have a few seconds — that shocked silence usually meant that she was about to get an absolute earful, and she needed to get her shots in now. "I'm an adult. I'm twenty years old. You have to stop treating me like I'm made of glass, you have to stop trying to control my life. I know you do it out of love, I know you're just trying to protect me... but I need to learn how to live on my own. I need to be able to protect myself."

She could hear herself speaking — she knew how tired she was, how disoriented from the trip, how much more clear and coherent she could have been if she wasn't so exhausted... but at the same time, she knew that this needed to be said. Knew that she needed to stand up for herself, finally. She should have done it years ago — should have done it in high school, honestly, or even earlier. Her parents needed to know that she was taking charge of her own life. Better late than never, right?

"Mom, I'm not going to call you every day," she continued, into the eerie silence that she now recognized as a trap that her parents liked to lay for her to incriminate herself. Their silence had always scared her, as a child — she'd always felt the need to fill it, to keep talking until they said something... and usually, they wouldn't speak until

she'd apologized for whatever imagined slight she'd given them, until she'd groveled for forgiveness and promised to be even more obedient, even more accommodating, even more of a doormat than she'd been before. Not this time. "I need to be by myself over here, okay? I need to live my own life. I'll send you an email every evening letting you know that I'm safe, I love you both, but I'm going to block your number from my phone. I'll see you when I get home. I think we're going to have a lot to talk about."

And with that, she hung up the phone, feeling giddy and delirious and completely, utterly terrified. The adrenaline that surged through her powered her just long enough to do as she'd promised, to block her mother's number — and with a sharp intake of breath, she blocked her father's number, too. Then she sat on the side of her bed, staring blankly at the wooden wall across from her, hardly daring to believe that she'd actually done what she'd just done. What the hell had gotten into her? A momentary impulse surged to unblock them, to call them right back and beg desperately for their forgiveness... but she didn't move, and that impulse faded, settled, returned to the depths from which it had came.

She was free. She was in a foreign country, and she'd finally stood up to her parents... and there was nothing they could do to reach her now. They had no say over her life anymore — no control of her bank account or her finances, no way of interfering with her. The worst they could do was destroy her things back home... which would be a wrench, but her most valuable possessions were with her, either tucked into her suitcase or her handbag...

No, that wasn't true, was it? The most valuable possession she had was herself. Her mind, her wits, her spirit, and her body... a possession that she'd let her parents keep control of for far too long. It was long past time that she took control, that she stood up for herself. Her heart pounding hard with exhilaration, Audra got to her feet and paced restlessly around her room. She'd been intending to settle in and do some reading before bed... but right now, the idea of lying down felt about as impossible as leaping into the sky and doing a few laps of the manor from the air. She was far too amped up to even think about sleep.

So instead, she slipped out of her room, locking the door behind her, and heading down the corridor where it opened into the courtyard. It was a beautiful night, with the stars shining down from regular gaps in the cloud cover, and a moon gleaming occasionally through the mist... she shivered a little in the cool air, then set off walking. A few laps of the grounds would calm her nerves... then she'd see about getting some sleep. Part of her could hardly believe what she'd done, the boundary she'd finally set with her parents...

She was here. She was alone. And finally — *finally* — she was actually free.

She headed out along the road that led to the manor, interested

to see what the place was like after dark. There was thick, swirling fog that quickly enveloped her, and she amused herself striding through it, twirling and letting her skirts play with the mist. A brisk walk kept her warm, and she headed down a well-worn path, remembering that part of the following day's orientation would be about learning the various walking paths around the manor. Why not get a head start on them tonight? She had her phone in her pocket for a light if she needed it, but right now the moonlight was so bright that she could make her way easily between the trees. The fresh, cool evening air, the mist playing around her ankles, and the knowledge that she was truly, blissfully on her own for the first time in her life... it all contrived to make her feel so joyful that she could barely stop herself from skipping every other step.

By the time she was tired enough to think about heading back to the manor, though, she felt a worried tremor run down her spine that she did her best to suppress. All she'd done was walk along this path for half an hour or so — it would be easy enough to simply turn around and walk back. Heading back down the path, trying to ignore the way the fog crowded in, making it impossible to see any recognizable traces of the path she'd walked here... but she forced down her panic. That was her parents talking, their old paranoid ways — telling her she was lost in the woods, that she was going to freeze to death overnight...

Then she came upon a fork in the road, which really made her frown. She couldn't remember passing a fork in the road — was it possible that the fog had made her miss it? She bit her lip, not sure which path to take... she opted for the one which felt like it was the straightest, assuming that if there had been a sharp turn, she'd have remembered or noticed it. Still, her worry didn't ease as she hastened along the path, now not completely sure that she was heading the

right way... and remembering that there were a huge number of walking trails, many of which were whole-day affairs that took hours and hours to get you back to the manor.

She lost track of time quickly, though she had her phone's clock to let her know how late it was getting... the notification about all her mother's missed calls was still on her screen, and she bit her lip as she tried unsuccessfully to dismiss it, knowing that it wouldn't disappear until she'd listened to all of the messages. No way. Not right now... not out here in the dark of the woods, she couldn't handle her mother's recriminating voice, telling her she was going to get herself into trouble if she wasn't careful.

Because the worrying thing was... the more she walked, and the more lost she felt, the stronger her suspicion became that she was, in fact, in trouble. Quite serious trouble. Audra tried to calm her pounding heart, telling herself not to be so silly. Worst case scenario, she was lost in the woods — she'd be out here until dawn, at which point the light would be enough to show her which way it was back to the manor. She wasn't going to starve to death, not with the delicious meal she'd had a few hours ago, and she wasn't going to freeze — not in summer, and not with the cardigan she'd grabbed before she'd left her room. Yes, it was embarrassing that she'd gotten lost — but was it catastrophic? Absolutely not.

Still, she'd thoroughly run out of breath by the time she decided to take a seat by a tree to rest. She must have taken a wrong turn at that stupid fork in the path — the path she'd been walking along for the last few minutes had emerged from the trees and started running alongside them, but the fog was so thick now that she couldn't see a damn thing. She might well have been within a few hundred yards of the manor — but she didn't want to go blundering off into the mist to check, not with how difficult it was to keep her bearings even now. Just sit down, that was the trick... take a few deep breaths, restore her calm and her energy, and hope for the fog to fade a little bit before she started trying to figure out where the hell she was.

God, her parents would be furious if they could see her now... she chased that thought away, mildly annoyed with herself. She was on her own. She was handling it on her own. With a sigh, she dug her phone out, wondering if maybe her GPS could give her a clue about how to get back to the manor... but her reception had been pretty dodgy ever since she'd arrived in Scotland, and she wasn't surprised to discover that she had absolutely no reception at all right now. Of course not. Still, she was grateful for the light — at least she had a light if the night grew darker.

Audra sat for a while, her back leaned up against a tree, trying to keep calm. It was rather beautiful out here, she had to give it that...



and honestly, she wasn't feeling particularly sleepy at the moment. Chalk it up to the adrenaline of the fight with her parents, or the jetlag, or the excitement of getting lost... but she felt pretty good right now, sitting out beneath the stars in a foreign country. She was safe, she was fine... she just needed to find her way back. She could do that. But right now, all she needed to do was listen to the sounds of the trees...

That was odd. Amid the rustling of wind through the branches and the distant calls of nocturnal birds, she could hear a strange sound — for all the world like the clopping of hooves. But who on earth would be out riding at this time of night? It didn't matter, she told herself firmly, quickly getting to her feet as she tried to figure out exactly where the sound was coming from in the depths of the fog. Hoofbeats meant riders, and riders meant people who could probably point her in the direction of the manor. She'd be back in her room, safe and sound with nobody any the wiser about how lost she'd just gotten...

But that thought faded fairly abruptly when she saw the horses emerge from the mist — two horses, not one, both trotting in what seemed like perfect synchronicity, their hooves striking the dirt path at the same time. Strange — she hadn't thought these walking paths were open to horses. Weren't the locals worried about tourists getting trampled? But she was quickly distracted from that when she set eyes on the two enormous men who were on the back of the horses.

For a start, they were massive — but that wasn't what really made her breath catch in her throat. The two of them were dressed for all the world like ancient Scottish soldiers — they were wearing kilts and tartan plaids, cloaks thrown around their shoulders, and one of them lifted what looked like an old-fashioned lantern high when he saw her standing by the side of the road. The light illuminated their faces, and she caught her breath. The men were identical. Twins, they had to be... there was no other explanation for those two handsome faces, framed by close-cropped black hair, piercing bright blue eyes. Two pairs of blue eyes... both fixed on her.

And both, she realized with an uneasy lurch, wearing odd expressions of shock and recognition. Who were they? she wondered. Guards, maybe? Security guards — was this the uniform that the manor's guards were asked to wear, much as domestic staff like her wore the old-fashioned costumes of medieval servants? That would make sense... though why were they bothering dressing up like that when there were no guests at the manor yet? As for the horses... she supposed there must be an actual stable somewhere, because she knew for a fact that the old stables at the Weatherby Manor had been converted into garages.

"Hey," she called, waving a little awkwardly as the men reined

their horses to a stop. The beasts snorted and huffed in the chilly night air, steam rising from their coats. She'd always had a soft spot for horses. Maybe she'd find out where these were kept, find out whether there was any chance she could borrow one on one of her days off... riding around the Highlands seemed like a pretty excellent way to spend her free time during this working holiday. But first things first. "I'm so sorry — can you point me in the direction of the manor?"

Twin expressions of shock gave way to confusion, and she frowned a little. What were they staring at, exactly? Had they never encountered a slightly lost woman before? She wasn't going to let them make her feel dumb for getting lost, she decided with a flare of temper. She'd tolerated enough of that from her parents to last a lifetime.

But one of the men spoke first, turning her frustration to confusion. "Annie," he said breathlessly, something taut and loaded in his voice. "Could it really be you? Why are you speaking like that?"

The first thing she noticed was the accent. Thick, rough, and undeniably beautiful — this was a Scottish man through and through, if the outfit hadn't given that away already. He was younger than she'd thought, too, from his voice — not much older than her, from what she could tell, maybe in his mid-twenties — so, if his brother was indeed his twin and it was basically impossible, looking at them, to assume anything else then he'd be the same age. Both of them as handsome as the other, too, she found herself thinking with an uncharacteristic thrill running down her spine.

But what on earth was he talking about? Had he mistaken her for someone else? People often got her name wrong — Audra wasn't an especially common name, after all, and she often got Audrey or Addy when people were trying to figure it out... but Annie? Definitely not. And there was something more, too — something about the absolute shellshock on the man's face that told her that something more was going on here than she was currently privy to. "I'm not Annie," she said cautiously. "My name's Audra Kendall, I'm here on a summer program to work at the Manor —"

"Weatherby's Manor?" That was the other brother — his voice was sharper than his brother's, though both of them exchanged slightly irritated glances, as though she'd mentioned something that they both disliked. "You're working for that —"

"Duncan," the first man said warningly, turning his eyes back to Audra. "You're disoriented. I understand. But it's you — truly, it's you. The spitting image of her. You've come back to me." There were tears standing in his eyes, and she felt a flare of embarrassment, of acute worry that he was getting carried away with some train of thought that was built on faulty premises. "My Annie —"

"It's not her, you fool," the second brother hissed.

She found herself gravitating to him — had his brother called him Duncan? He, at least, didn't seem to think she was this Annie person.

"Just a lookalike."

"Look," she said, feeling irritation flare in her. "Can you just point me back to the manor? I'm not whoever this Annie person is, I'm just lost. The fog got me turned around, and —"

But then she stopped dead. Because the fog, as quickly as it had come, had disappeared completely, leaving the way clear for her to see where she was. And what she saw made her heart stop in her chest.

Now that the fog was gone, Audra could see that she'd been

right — she wasn't more than half a mile from the manor. If she'd been brave enough, she could have just set out into the mist and walked straight back to Weatherby Manor. But something was wrong — something was deeply, deeply wrong. She'd seen the manor from this angle — this was where the bus had approached from. She could see the house, see the lights in all its upper windows, beaming down over the fields that surrounded it... but something was profoundly, deeply different. The detailing, the colors... they were all off. And besides that... her eyes widened as she spotted men on horses, riding around the perimeter wall.

Now, she knew for a fact that that wasn't part of the deal. So, what the hell was going on? What was she looking at? Had she somehow stumbled upon a different manor, almost identical to the Weatherby Manor but with horses? What the hell was going on? A deranged part of her whispered that she must have been transported back in time — that's why all these vaguely medieval people kept appearing out of the fog... but that was a childish fantasy, and she put it aside with an impatient grimace. She was twenty damn years old, she wasn't living in a fairytale. She was an adult, and she was going to get to the bottom of this.

"Where the hell am I?" she demanded, swinging back to regard the two men, who only now seem to have thought of the idea of jumping down from their horses. That made it difficult, of course — she'd been using the color of their horses as a means of telling them apart, and if they moved away from the horses then she'd need to figure something else out. One of them had his cloak pinned with a silver brooch, the other didn't have a brooch at all — that would have to do. The one with the brooch was Duncan, the one without hadn't quite bothered to introduce himself yet. He was too busy staring at her like she was a ghost, or returned from the dead, or something. Uneasiness was

beginning to prickle at her, her mother's words about avoiding being alone with men at night coming back to haunt her. Well, it wasn't like she'd done it on purpose, now was it?

"You're half a mile from Weatherby Manor," said Duncan, looking sideways at his brother, who was still gazing at her. She avoided eye contact, deciding to zero in on the brother who was at least trying to explain her situation to her. "In Scotland."

"I know that much," she said, feeling a little impatient. "I flew here last night. The bus brought us all up — like I said, I'm working at the manor, I'm —"

But the other man — the strange one — was shaking his head, gazing at her with wonder. "I knew it. You're one of them. They all talk of strange things, of flying great distances, of vehicles that move without horses or oxen to pull them —"

"Don't be daft," Duncan said tersely. "She's just — it's a coincidence, Brian, that's all it is. Annie's dead and buried. You pulled her from the water yourself."

*Brian.* So that was his name. Duncan and Brian — one with a brooch, one without. She hated to think what she was going to do if the brooch got removed or covered by the folds of the cloak... well, she supposed it wouldn't be the worst thing in the world if she mixed them up. They probably got it a lot, looking as similar as they did.

But Brian was looking stubborn. "I'm telling you, Duncan, this is her. This is Annie, as I live and breathe — she may be speaking with a strange accent like the others, but it's her. It's the woman I married on Skye —"

"My name," Audra said firmly, "is Audra, not Annie. I've never been married. And I've never been to Skye, for that matter," she added, thinking back to the map of Scotland she'd studied. "Though I've heard it's nice." She shook herself. "This is all — beside the point. Are you telling me that's Weatherby Manor, over there? It looks —" She hesitated, feeling a little ridiculous. "Well, it looks different than it did when I left."

"Aye, that'd be right," Brian said with a hoarse little chuckle, running a hand through his dark hair. "Oh, lass, I've so much to explain to you... if you're like the others, you think it's — what, sometime in the early twenty-first century?"

She narrowed her eyes. "What do you mean, I think it's the twenty-first century? Of course, it's the twenty-first century. I haven't time traveled."

But the glance the men exchanged made her narrow her eyes even further — and Brian heaved a sigh. "Annie — Audra, sorry —" he corrected himself, seemingly catching the look of fury on her face — "I've got some — some uncomfortable news for you. You — you

have."

"Have what?" She folded her arms, increasingly more exasperated with this Brian. She wished Duncan would cut in, talk some sense into his brother — he seemed to be the voice of reason here. But he seemed to have withdrawn, an odd, closed-off look on his face as he seemed to settle in to watch the conversation unfold.

"Traveled through time," Brian said simply, spreading his hands. "You're not alone. There are almost a dozen women just like you — brought back through time by the magic of a witch who died here... a few decades ago. It's a long story," he added — but there was an uncertainty in his voice that she suspected had something to do with the look of utter scorn on her face.

"Look," she said through gritted teeth. "I've heard and believed some pretty far-fetched stuff in my life. I'm a Pagan, for God's sake, I'm interested in — in witchcraft, and magic, and spells, and all that kind of stuff. But if you're honestly expecting me to believe that a walk through the fog was enough to transport me five hundred years into the past, you've got another think coming." But her heart was pounding hard in her chest and she realized with a dizzy lurch that she didn't quite believe what she was saying. Didn't it make sense? Hadn't she been wondering why there were horses, why the facade of Weatherby Manor seemed to have changed since she'd walked out here? A ridiculous explanation it might have been... but it was an explanation that seemed to make sense.

And what other explanation could there be? Some elaborate prank? It would have involved a costume department and a small fortune to perform whatever illusion was making the Weatherby Manor look so different... who would bother doing that on her account? Some American tourist who was over here for a month? No. Something strange was going on... and the more she thought about it, the more she felt dizziness and shock begin to encroach on her mind, eradicating the doubt and suspicion that had been there.

She'd always been drawn to the idea of magic — ever since she'd been a tiny, sickly child, spending long days in bed waiting patiently to be well again, obediently taking whatever potions and pills her mother offered her in the faith that they'd make her healthy. One of her favorite books had been an enormous, thickly bound book of folklore that her father had gotten for her when she was small, reasoning that small girls enjoyed fairytales, so his daughter may as well spend some time reading in her convalescence. Little did her stoic, church-going father know that he was planting seeds that would sprout, as Audra grew older, into the seeds of Paganism. Not that she was a practicing witch by any stretch of the imagination... she'd barely even been brave enough to Google the craft, let alone to start

practicing it. But like so many children of overprotective parents, she held a secret place in her heart for magic and witchcraft — a part of her that perked up its ears whenever the possibility of something magical arose.

And right now, that part of her was humming with enthusiasm. Could it be? Could she really let herself believe that she'd been transported back through time? Five hundred years or more? Her heart was pounding, and she felt dizzy as she gazed around her with new eyes, stared across the dark field toward the distant specter of Weatherby Manor, lit up by what she now realized was torchlight, not the electric lights she remembered, being patrolled by guards on horseback...

"Oh my God," she whispered, turning her shocked gaze back to the twins, who were both looking at her with worried expressions on their faces. "Seriously?"

"I knew it," Brian breathed, and before she could react, she found herself being pulled into his arms, into a bear-like embrace that was surprisingly reassuring and warm, if unexpected and a little intimidating.

She stiffened, feeling him bury his face in her long, dark hair, his arms trembling as he held her close to his body... the warmth of him was rather welcome in the depths of the chilly night, but she felt a little uncomfortable, knowing that he was a complete stranger, and knowing that he thought she was his long-lost wife. She had plenty of time for the idea of reincarnation, of course... but without any of the so-called Anna's memories to draw on, nothing but a surface-deep resemblance to the woman, she couldn't help but feel a little like an impostor as Brian held her tightly.

Thankfully, it wasn't long before Duncan stepped in, clearing his throat hard as he tugged his brother away from her. She stepped back, cheeks a little flushed. For all the chaos that was whirling through her mind right now, she had to admit... there had been something very nice about being held in Brian's arms. Something that went beyond just the warmth of his body in the cool of the night, the pleasant, familiar scent of horse from what she assumed was a long ride, a more subtle and noticeable musk that seemed to belong to just him... she flushed a little, lowering her eyes as Brian stared at her with what was undeniably love in his eyes.

"I'm not Anna," she said, biting her lip. "I'm Audra, I'm an architecture undergrad from Ohio, I'm from —" She took a deep breath. Was she going to play along with this farcical idea that she'd traveled through time? Did she really have any other choice? "I'm from the twenty-first century. I'm not... I'm sorry, but I'm not your wife."

"Grief does strange things to a person," Duncan said, shaking his head as he gave his brother a warning look. "He's just bereaved, Audra. I apologize for him — for the liberties he's taken."

It was just a hug, she thought with a frown... but she supposed things were a little different in the medieval era. God, that made her head spin, and she shifted on her feet a little, worried she might stagger if she didn't get her balance. Brian looked chagrined... but not defeated. "That's what they all say," he said firmly. "All the time-stranded women have no memories of their past lives... but it's no coincidence that they're all the spitting image of their lost loves."

"Let's take her to the Keep, then," Duncan said, sounding annoyed. "We can't stand around out here all night."

A thrill ran down her spine. "The Keep?" she said sharply, thinking back to the ruin they'd passed on the road. "You mean Castle MacClaran?"

Duncan smiled, nodding. "Aye, lass. That we do."



Audra's heart was pounding as Brian knelt down to give her a boost into the saddle of his horse. She couldn't believe this was really happening — she was about to ride to an honest-to-God medieval castle. She remembered peering through the window of the bus up the hillside to where the ruin perched on the top of the hill, the once-grand building wrecked by time and the elements... the idea of seeing it in all its former glory filled her with an unexpected sense of excitement and delight, for all the world as though it had been calling her. Weatherby Manor was pleasant enough, of course... but she knew what that looked like. It was the Keep she was really interested in.

And besides, her more rational side spoke up — it would be good to get undeniable evidence that she really had traveled through time. There was still a possibility — however slight — that the men on horses were part of some bizarre prank. But if she got to the Keep — to Castle MacClaran — and it was more than just a ruin? Well, that would be unassailable evidence that she really had traveled through time. And that... well, hadn't she been expecting an adventure when she'd gotten on the plane? A dizzy rush of laughter almost overwhelmed her as she settled on horseback, the skirt of her dress making things a little awkward. Brian raised an inquisitive eyebrow at her from the ground, one hand on the horse's bridle and the other on its shoulder.

"Sorry. Just thinking about something my mother said before I left," she said, shaking her head. "She told me there was no way of foreseeing what kind of trouble I could get in overseas before I got there. Guess she was right."

"Mothers have a way of being right," Duncan said as he swung aboard the other horse. That strange, closed expression was still on his face — she could tell he was worried about his brother. "Ours certainly always was."

"You're twins, right?" she asked, glancing between them.

Brian chuckled. "Aye, we are."

"What gave it away?" Duncan asked, drawing a weak little laugh from her.

Behind her, she felt Brian swing nimbly aboard the horse and settle behind her, the warmth of his back and his legs meeting her body and sending a surreptitious little thrill down her spine. There was something very pleasant about the way he put his arms around her to grab the reins of the horse, and she resisted the urge to turn to get a better look at his face, trying not to think about how easy it would be to turn and kiss him, the way she'd seen in half a dozen romantic movies... God, she was in her own period drama now, wasn't she? Though she'd never seen a medieval romance about a time traveler...

The horses set off down the road again, and she glanced over her shoulder, watching Weatherby Manor disappear behind them until even the glow of the torchlight had disappeared over the horizon. Duncan was still holding the lantern, which lit their way along the long, dark road, but the sky had come over much cloudier than it had been, and the moonlight she'd relied on when she'd been lost in the woods was gone, plunging them into darkness. The warmth of Brian behind her was a distant comfort, but as the minutes stretched on longer and longer as they settled into the easy rhythm of the horse's gait, she felt her mind beginning to catch up with her... and in its wake, the old fear.

Where the hell was she? What was she doing here, sitting on the back of a horse with a strange man? What would her mother say about the messages she was sending to these strangers by coming along with them so easily? She needed to know where she was, sure... but she'd just trusted them, just climbed on board their horse and now they were taking her God knew where, with nothing but their word to assure her that they weren't spiriting her away to do... well, she didn't like to think about the unpleasant things that could entail. She of course knew what was possible, but she'd always been so sheltered she'd never thought she'd ever be a victim.

*Don't be silly*, she told herself firmly, trying to get to grips with what was happening. *Duncan and Brian are helping you. They're taking you somewhere where you can figure out what's happened to you, how you got here...* but where was here? The only landmark she'd been familiar with was Weatherby Manor, and that had long since disappeared behind them. They could be taking her just about anywhere. What if they'd been lying about the time travel? What if they'd deceived her somehow — what if this was all just some scheme to trick her into trusting them? Her heart was pounding hard in her chest and she could feel tears stinging at the backs of her eyes.

God, how she hated crying. If she could wave a magic wand and

change one thing about herself, it would be how easily she cried when she got overwhelmed or worried. Her mother and father were always using her tears as evidence that she was weak, that she was immature, that she still needed them to protect her... she hated it more than anything, but what could she do about it when she always burst into tears at a moment's provocation? She'd keep arguing and fighting through her tears, of course — she'd spent much of the conversation about this trip with tears dripping down her cheeks, actually — but there was definitely something about it that always weakened her case. And she hated the feeling now of a single tear spilling from her eyes and rolling down her face.

She was just tired, that was all. Tired, and overwhelmed, and confused, and frightened. She needed more information about where she was, about what was going on, what had happened to her... what kind of strange magic had transported her back through time. Because the further they rode along the road, the more she began to doubt her brief, paranoid suspicion that Brian and Duncan were messing with her, misleading her about what year it actually was. She remembered the countryside a little, from the bus — there was no way they could have ridden this far without seeing some kind of modern landmark, even just a paved road or a sign or a streetlight. But there was nothing. All around them, for miles and miles, just darkness... the highlands, uncivilized, untouched by modern society.

Like it or not — she was here. And maybe that was why she couldn't stop the tears from rolling down her cheeks. Was she mourning? she wondered absent-mindedly, wiping her tears away as she felt her shoulders begin to shake. Or was she in delayed shock — shock at the journey, shock at her new surroundings? She'd felt a little teary in the airport, hadn't she, when she'd found herself plunged into a brand-new environment? Well, an international flight had nothing on this...

It was a stupid impulse. But she wanted to know for sure where she was, what was going on... so she reached into her pocket and pulled out her phone. She caught Duncan's curious glance from the other horse and gritted her teeth, realizing that if she really was in the past, what she was doing would seem completely insane to both of them. For a moment, she expected her phone screen not even to light up — but sure enough, it still had battery from when she'd charged it back at the manor back in the future, she thought remotely, and the screen lit up. Without even thinking, she opened her most recent contact — her mother — and hit the dial button. But it didn't work. Frowning, she went into the settings and unblocked the number, feeling a tingle of unease run down her spine...

But nothing happened. The phone didn't light up with calls, didn't

vibrate in her hand — though she had no doubt that her mother wouldn't have stopped trying to call her yet, not with the unprecedented argument they'd had just a few hours earlier. Both her mother and father would be up all night trying to get in touch with her — they'd probably call the manor, too, once they realized she wasn't going to answer her own phone. She stared down at her phone grimly, waiting for the call... but nothing. She hit dial on her mother's contact — and heard only the dull beeping that her phone always emitted when it was out of range.

No signal. Of course, there was no signal, she thought dully, feeling a rush of what felt like grief rush over her. Cellphone towers wouldn't be invented for hundreds of years. What she was holding, warm and bright in her hand, was effectively a brick. And what was more, in a few hours, once the battery had run down — she'd never be able to turn it on again. Tears began to course down her face as she stared down at her phone, disbelieving — she tabbed into her photos, scrolling frantically through, suddenly desperate to remember as much as she could before the battery ran out...

"Are you alright, lass?"

Brian's voice behind her, surprised her with its gentleness.

At least he wasn't calling her Anna anymore, she thought distractedly, dashing the tears away from her cheeks with one sleeve as she scrolled through her photos. Not many on here... she'd opted for cloud storage before she'd left on her trip, reasoning she'd need plenty of space to store all the photos she'd be taking, and needless to say, the cloud wasn't accessible from medieval Scotland.

"I'm really here, huh?" she said weakly, feeling her heart thudding so hard in her chest she thought she might just pass out and fall off the horse. "It's really — it's really happened. I traveled through time. I feel like I'm about to pass out," she admitted, feeling her vision blur a little — and then Brian's arms were around her, squeezing tightly even as he kept hold of the reins. She leaned against him gratefully, feeling her body trembling with the shock and fear — and the ever-present tears that she was doing her best to keep in.

"Aye, lass, it's bound to be a shock," he said softly, his voice low and very pleasant in her ear. She clutched onto him gratefully, taking hold of his strong forearms and leaning back against his broad chest, grateful to have him there despite how ridiculous and weak she felt for collapsing into tears like this.

"Sorry," she kept saying, gasping for breath as the sobs shook her — but Brian clicked his tongue.

"You've nothing to apologize for. You've been through a lot."

More than he could imagine, she found herself thinking, biting her lip. Traveling through time like this would be a shock to just about

anyone... but how was she going to be able to cope with this? Her, some twenty-year-old who'd barely ever left home before, basically still a child who'd never stepped out from the shadow of her parents' protection? How was she going to find the strength to cope not only with being overseas, away from her home — but away from her own time, too, away from all the technology and modern conveniences that she had come to rely on just as much as she relied on the protection of her parents?

It was too much. And Audra knew, as they made their steady way along the dark road, that she had to find a way back to her old life as soon as she could.

Brian kept holding her tight, murmuring soothing things to her

as the horse continued along the road. Duncan was riding slightly ahead, clearly keeping watch for anyone else on the road, and Audra let herself wonder for a moment if it was dangerous to be riding this late at night. She was grateful, she supposed, to have these men here to protect her from robbers or brigands or packs of wild wolves, or whatever it was that stalked the roads of medieval Scotland... though if she was honest, she still wasn't fully convinced she could trust Brian and Duncan. Then again, as time wore on and they continued to refrain from doing anything dastardly to her, she felt her suspicion begin to fade. God, what would her mother say?

No way of knowing, she told herself firmly, feeling more tears creep out of her eyes and trickle down her cheeks. God, it was always such an avalanche whenever she let herself get started crying... stupid idea, really, she should have just forced herself to stay calm. She felt stupid and weak and childish in front of these men — but there was no helping that now, was there? All she could do was hope she'd get a chance to redeem herself later, to prove to them that she was stronger than the frail little damsel in distress they'd found by the side of the road.

At least she was warm, sitting on the horse with Brian behind her. The night was chilly, and it seemed they had a long ride ahead of them — she was trying to remember how long it had taken by bus to get from the Keep to Weatherby Manor, but she'd been dozing on and off and not looking at the time much. Besides, she had no idea how fast a horse was compared to a bus, and at any rate her perception of time was being thoroughly interfered with by the journey she'd taken. Her phone, for some strange reason, was telling her it was three in the afternoon. She knew that was wrong, at least. But she didn't know much else.

"How far is the Keep?" she asked, finally, when she was feeling a

little more settled and the tears had dried on her cheeks. Brian was still holding her closer than he really needed to in order to keep her from falling off the horse, but she wasn't going to complain about that — he was warm, and very comforting in the cold of the night. The fact that he still seemed to suspect she was his lost wife, returned from the dead somehow, was troubling... but right now, it was lower on her list of priorities than staying warm.

"Not far now." It was Duncan who answered, his voice clipped, and there was a worried look on his face when he glanced back at Brian.

"You don't look thrilled," she pointed out, feeling a spark of curiosity rise in her about the look on Duncan's face. Any distraction from her fear and shock would be welcome at this point. But it was Brian who heaved a sigh.

"If I'm honest, lass, it's a rather odd time for you to be joining us. We haven't been back to the Keep for some time," he explained. "We weren't exactly popular there, even as young men."

Duncan was chuckling — the laughter sounded rather at odds with Brian's serious tone, and she looked between the two brothers, feeling her curiosity rise. "We got up to all kinds of mischief when we were younger," Duncan said with a shake of his head — but Brian objected.

"You did, maybe," he said irritably. "And we were both blamed for it. Nobody could tell us apart," he added with a sigh. "Nobody save our mother, of course, may she rest in peace. And Duncan was fond of pranks. Still is, in fact."

"Can you blame me? We were given the gift of being identical, but this stick in the mud never wanted to take advantage."

"We're not returning to our old ways," Brian said firmly, and though he was speaking to Audra, she got the distinct impression that the message was more intended for Duncan than it was for her. "We left as boys, we're returning as men — and we're going to act like it."

"Yes, sire," Duncan said with a roll of his eyes, affecting a posh English accent that couldn't help but make Audra smile.

"How long have you been away?"

"Oh, six years at least," Brian said softly. "We set out to seek our fortunes, traveled the country a little, got ourselves into trouble —"

"It was great," Duncan said with a grin. "Then this fool had to go ahead and fall in love and ruin it all."

She glanced over her shoulder, curious about this particular part of the story — but there was a sudden closed look on Brian's face that told her it was best to tread carefully around the subject of his wife. Anna, that had been her name — hadn't he said they'd been married on Skye? But she'd been lost. What had happened? The men couldn't have been older than their mid-twenties... presumably she'd been a young woman, too. Strange, to lose someone so young.

"It's two years since I lost my Anna," Brian said softly, as if sensing her curiosity. She appreciated the explanation... but she felt a pang of guilt at making him revisit something that was clearly a painful memory. "She truly was a wonder. The spitting image of you, Audra, as we've discussed," he added, and she could hear the rueful smile in his voice. "My apologies for startling you so."

"I can imagine it would have been a shock," she said softly. "Seeing someone who looked so much like her." She hesitated — but her curiosity got the best of her. "What happened to her? Was it childbirth?" She remembered reading about how often women used to die in childbirth in one of the books her mother had casually left around for her to find — it was a tactic, she knew now, to discourage her from any kind of interaction with the opposite sex that might lead to such a thing.

But Brian shook his head. "No, nothing like that, I'm afraid. She..." For no reason at all, she found herself glancing at Duncan, who was looking at them intently over his shoulder. There was a strange, sharp, hunted expression on his face, and something curious happened when he saw her looking at him — the expression vanished without a trace, as though it had never been there, replaced with a bland look of concern for his brother. Had Brian noticed? It didn't look like it — he was gazing out at the dark road before them, clearly moved by the story he was trying to tell. "She took her life, I'm afraid."

Audra took a sharp breath in. No wonder he'd been so distraught when he'd first seen her. "I'm so sorry, Brian. That's awful."

"I just wish I knew why," he said softly. "I'll admit, that was part of why I was so... so thrilled to see you. Part of me had hoped that you'd know something about why she did what she did."

"They never have any of their past self's memories," Duncan said firmly, as though trying to put a stop to the conversation. "I've said it before and I'll say it again, Brian — you need to stop torturing yourself. There was nothing you could have done. She just..." He gestured vaguely. "Some things man wasn't meant to know."

Suicide, then. Audra couldn't help but be moved by the story, by her lookalike's plight. How heartbreaking, that she hadn't felt that she could talk about whatever was troubling her with her husband... Brian seemed so sweet, and he had clearly loved Annie a great deal. Why hadn't she come to him with her troubles instead of taking her own life? Then again, she reminded herself, depression wasn't often a disease that made a lot of sense. She remembered a time when she'd been in the eleventh grade, when a girl from her math class had stopped coming to school for a whole month before turning up again, dark-eyed and quiet. At the time, Audra had been too busy with homework and study to think much of it — she'd assumed that the girl



had gone on holiday with her family or something, or else been unwell. It wasn't until months later at one of the rare school parties she'd been allowed to attend that she'd overheard the truth — that the girl had made an attempt on her own life and been put in a psychiatric facility to recover for several weeks. She'd had no obvious reason to harm herself — she'd always been a popular, clever girl, well liked, on a couple of different sport teams with good grades and a loving family... but mental illness didn't much care how good your life was.

She was glad that the girl had survived her attempt on her own life — because looking at the impact of his wife's loss on Brian made it very clear that depression had more victims than just those who suffered it. She wished she could comfort him somehow, find a way to console him about his wife's untimely death... but words felt hollow in the face of such a loss. Besides, she was uncomfortably aware of the fact that she looked so much like Annie. She didn't want Brian getting the wrong idea, using her as a coping mechanism for his loss. She might look like her, but she wasn't her.

Still — she was curious to find out what her connection was to the woman. From what Brian and Duncan had told her — and it wasn't especially detailed — there were almost a dozen other women who'd traveled back through time like she had, and all of them had found themselves in a similar situation to her and Brian — bearing a strong resemblance to a woman who had passed away, a woman who'd been loved by a member of the MacClaran family. A strange coincidence... and a shiver ran down her spine as it occurred to her that it might just be more than a coincidence. Hadn't Duncan said something about a witch? Or had that been Brian? She wished she'd been paying more attention... in the somber atmosphere that had descended following their conversation about Annie, she didn't feel like it was appropriate to start asking questions again.

"There's the Keep," Brian said, what felt like an hour later. She'd been half-dozing, the steady rhythm of the horse lulling her into something like a sleep, though she'd had to stay awake enough to keep her body upright... and her eyes widened in shock as she looked to where he was pointing. There it was — she felt the shock of recognition ring through her. That was the castle she'd seen through the windows of the bus, what felt like a thousand years ago now... but really, it had been less than twenty-four hours, hadn't it? God, she felt tired... but her exhaustion faded as she studied the castle, delight beginning to mingle with the shock.

"It's so big," she whispered. Sure enough, what had once been a ruin loomed over the surrounding countryside, at least four times as tall as the ruin she remembered seeing — and with an enormous wall

surrounding it, too, on which tiny points of light indicated the patrols of guards. There were lights in some of the windows, too, even at this time of the night, and the overall effect was incredibly impressive — a huge monolith, looming over the countryside, for all the world as though it was keeping watch.

Audra felt her heart pounding with excitement, not fear, for the first time since she'd arrived. The Keep had been calling to her ever since she'd gotten here... and now, she was finally about to find out exactly why that was.

The road led them up the winding side of the hill toward the

keep, the horses accelerating as if sensing that they were close to home, close to a good rest. But the energy between Brian and Duncan wasn't exactly celebratory — and she remembered what the two of them had said about not being the most popular men at the Keep. Troublemakers as young men, she thought with a small smile, thinking back to the rowdier boys in her high school class. That made sense. Surely their family would forgive a few harmless pranks, though? That was what family was for... and she felt an odd pang of grief as she thought of her own family. Would they ever forgive her for what she'd done? She could only hope they would. They loved her, didn't they? Love meant forgiveness.

But she had to put her own family out of her mind for now and focus on Duncan and Brian's. After all, the MacClaran's were the ones who knew just what the hell had brought her here — if she was going to figure out a way back home, she was going to need their help. Feeling an odd pang of nervousness, she took a deep breath as the horses approached a pair of huge gates set in the great wall that protected the Keep from the surrounding area. There were guards atop the wall, and they called down an enquiry to the men in the same thick Scottish accent that she'd been steadily getting used to.

"Brian and Duncan MacClaran," Duncan called, voice echoing from the stone of the wall. "We've sent word."

"You were expected earlier this evening," the guard called back, squinting down, and raising his torch high as his eyes fell onto Audra. "And who's that?"

"The reason we're late," Brian called, a smile twitching at his lips though his face was worried. "This is Audra Kendall, a stray we picked up."

"Hi," she called, lifting a hand to wave. "Sorry for the trouble."

She wasn't prepared for the guard's response — his eyes widened,

and he reached out to grab the elbow of the stoic man standing beside him, muttering something into his ear. The other man nodded and turned on his heel, hastening away down what she presumed to be a staircase on the other side of the wall. Mystified, she looked at Brian, who gave her a quick smile of reassurance.

"He'll be off to tell the Laird of you," he said softly. "Donal's wife is a time-traveler like yourself — he's always keen to meet the new arrivals."

"It's the middle of the night," she said softly, wrinkling her nose. "I feel so rude for waking everyone up —"

But before she could finish her thought, she heard a squeal of metal. Sure enough, the gate was lifting, slowly but steadily, and Duncan called up a brief word of thanks before urging his horse through the gate. Brian followed on his own horse, and she felt a brief pang of regret that their ride was over... she'd gotten very comfortable, sitting there on horseback with his strong, warm arms around her, keeping her safe... but as they crossed the courtyard of the castle, she was quickly distracted by the sight of the great Keep looming up above them. It was beautiful — the stonework good as new. Not good as new, she told herself with an odd shiver of disorientation — it was new. At least, compared to the ruin she'd glimpsed from the windows of the bus...

If she'd needed any further confirmation that she truly had traveled through time, this was it. She felt a little shaky as Brian helped her down from the horse, her legs feeling numb and wobbly as she took a few careful steps — he chuckled as she stumbled and almost fell, steadying her effortlessly, and she smiled up at him gratefully. Duncan cleared his throat, all but stepping in between them, and she straightened, a little embarrassed. Had she been being too forward, too inappropriate with him? Maybe she wasn't doing as good a job as she thought she was at hiding how handsome she found them both...

"Laird Donal will meet with you three in the Hall." The guard who'd hastened down from the wall when they'd arrived was in front of them now, looking a little pompous as he delivered his message — but she got the impression that he was watching both Duncan and Brian closely.

Had they really been such a pair of troublemakers when they'd been here? How could childish pranks have had such an impact on the Keep, even years later... unless Duncan had understated just how significant those pranks had been? She bit her lip, worried that the people here would think poorly of her for being brought in by these clearly disgraced members of the family... then again, she supposed she should be grateful that she was here in the first place. After all, without Brian and Duncan she wouldn't have had a horse to make the

journey to the Keep on... nor would she have even known the way, not in the dark with none of the landmarks she'd come to rely on in the future.

They headed across the courtyard and up the stairs to the castle, moving through the great wooden doors with Audra resisting the urge to gape around with some difficulty. The entrance hall was so impressive — decorated with enormous, colorful tapestries the likes of which she'd seen in history books, but never quite so colorful, always faded with age and weather... she could tell that Brian and Duncan were looking around, too, though she imagined they were thinking rather different things about coming home. How long had they been away again? Six or seven years? It must be strange, returning home... especially with a stray like her along for the ride.

The dining hall was through a door in the entrance hall, and surprisingly gloomy when they stepped inside — the main source of light was at the other end of the great room, where a table had been set hastily with a few candles. She peered around curiously, trying to figure out the room even in the gloom — there were several long tables, clearly used regularly for meals and the like, and she tried to imagine the place full of people talking and laughing. But Brian and Duncan hastened across the room to the high table at the other end, and she did her best to keep up, not wanting to interfere with what was clearly going to be a rather tense family reunion.

The man at the table must have been the Laird. For some reason, she'd been expecting an older man, but to her surprise Donal couldn't have been any older than thirty, if that. He was a handsome young man, too, with large brown eyes and a shock of pale blond hair. He was clad, too, in the same shade of tartan that Brian and Duncan were wearing — and a smile spread across his face when he looked at them.

"My troublemaking cousins," he said softly, shaking his head. "It's good to see you both again."

She felt rather than saw Brian let out a sigh of relief — it was as though a great wave of tension went rushing out of him, and he stepped close to Laird Donal to take his hand and shake it firmly. "It's good to see you, cousin," he said softly.

But Audra couldn't help glance sideways at Duncan, who was standing still, his face closed, as though leaving Brian to do the introductions and niceties for both of them. That was strange — he'd been very quick to talk to Audra when they'd first met, hadn't he?

"It's good to be back home."

"You're family, and you're welcome back within our walls," Donal proclaimed, his voice oddly solemn.

Audra could feel the significance of what he was saying, sense the palpable relief in both of the brothers standing at her sides. But then

Donal's dark eyes fell on her, and the quirk of his eyebrow sent a shiver of anticipation down her spine. "But you haven't come alone."

"We found this one on the road," Brian explained softly, glancing back over his shoulder, and giving Audra a reassuring smile. "Audra Kendall. One of the travelers we've heard so much about."

"Another one," Donal said, clicking his tongue. "My word. You're most welcome to Castle MacClaran, Audra. Please know that you're safe here — that this Keep is your home for as long as you choose to occupy it."

"Thank you," she said softly. Then she glanced up at Brian. "And thank you both, for pulling me from the side of the road and bringing me here. I have no idea where I'd be without you."

Donal, looked at her with curiosity. "Tell me. Every traveler has borne a resemblance to a woman who was lost tragically from our own time — does Audra here bear such a resemblance?"

Duncan cleared his throat, seemingly about to speak, but before he could cut him off, his brother Brian was nodding. "Aye, she's the spitting image of my Annie. Gave me quite a fright when I first saw her," he added, a smile on his face.

Laird Donal nodded. "That tends to be the way of it," he explained, turning his eyes to Audra with a tight-lipped smile. "In the morning, I'll introduce you to my wife, and as many of the other time-stranded strays as we can round up. They'll be delighted to meet you, I'm certain — they've formed quite the little flock." He chuckled.

Audra couldn't help but smile. There was a warmth in the Laird's eyes that went some way to cutting through the solemnity of the meeting. "And they'll explain a little more about how it is you've gotten here, and their own rather eventful arrivals. For now, though — I'd imagine you're tired," he said, tilting his head. "The journey through time isn't an easy one, from what the other women have told me."

Was that why she was feeling so tired? She'd assumed it was just the cumulative stress of the jetlag and the shock of finding herself in such a strange place... but she nodded wearily, fighting back a yawn that seemed to have been summoned by the briefest mention of her exhaustion. "Thank you, Laird Donal," she said, offering her best curtsy.

"Mary will show you to your quarters," the Laird said — and she jumped in surprise as an older woman approached her, seemingly out of nowhere. Where had she been hiding? Somewhere in the gloom of the dining hall... she was a handsome woman, and though Audra couldn't tell how old she was, she held herself with that quiet, brittle quality that older women tended to have. Her bright green eyes danced with warmth, though, and Audra felt an immediate instinct to

trust her as she led her away across hall. Still, she looked back over her shoulder, where the twins were already deep in conversation with Donal. His expression was a lot sterner than it had been when she was there, and Mary uttered a low chuckle.

"Those three have a great deal to discuss, I'd warrant," she said, the beautiful lilt of her Scottish accent adorning the vowels. "As do you and I, my dear... though ours will be a much more pleasant chat than those troublemakers."

"Were they really that bad?" Audra wanted to know, curious despite herself. She was interested in what Mary had to talk to her about, too, but she couldn't resist asking about the twins before they were gone from their sight. But Mary only clicked her tongue, a dark expression on her face.

"The less said about those two and their schemes, the better," she said darkly. "But come, now." Her eyes gleamed. "Don't you want to know more about the magic that brought you here?"

They hurried through the quiet hallways of the castle together.

Mary had made it clear that they'd need to be on their own before they discussed magic or anything resembling witchcraft, and Audra put her exhaustion behind her, much more interested in hearing this exciting new development from this strange older woman with the luminous green eyes and the neat gray braid.

"I've organized some clothing for you, of course," she said as they headed down a hallway towards an open door, where Audra could just make out a light gleaming by the bedside. "To help you fit in a little better — though it'll take some practice getting in and out of it all at first, I'm afraid."

"Corsets and stuff?" Audra asked, curious despite herself.

Mary nodded, smiling. "Aye, and stuff," she said, her tone gently poking fun. There was something about her that reminded Audra of her grandmother — warmth balanced with firmness, whimsy with solemnity. The room she showed her into was cozy and delightful, with a freshly made bed and even a little fire burning in the grate at one end.

"Did you know I was coming?"

"We move fast, the folk of Castle MacClaran," Mary said with a smile dancing in her eyes. "When the guard came through to wake Laird Donal from his slumber, he woke me and a couple of servants to get this room ready for you, too. We've done this a few times already, you see."

"A dozen women," Audra said softly, shaking her head. "Did they all get lost in the fog, too?"

Mary shook her head. "Their stories are all different. The thing they have in common isn't the fog, or even the journey... it's the reason for it. I'm afraid you're the victim of a curse, Audra."

Her eyes widened, and she found herself sitting on the edge of the bed, fiercely curious to hear more of this story even as the soft



blankets invited her to lie down. "A curse?"

"Aye." Mary took a seat by the bed, pulling a hand-carved wooden chair over from a table by the wall and settling onto it with a serious look in her green eyes. "For years, the MacClarans have suffered under a curse laid by the dying breath of a witch named Morag. She was deeply in love with a MacClaran man, but the Laird at the time refused to allow them to be together. In an attempt to force him into allowing their love to flourish, she laid a curse that any woman beloved of a MacClaran man would meet an untimely fate."

Audra felt a chill run down her spine. "Brian said that his wife — she started, her heart pounding in her chest. "That she took her own life, that he didn't know why... was it because of the curse?"

Mary simply spread her hands, a solemn look on her beautiful face. "It may well have been. Usually, the curse has operated by causing accidents and mayhem — but I suppose it may well have caused enough darkness in the poor woman's soul to prompt such an awful action."

"Poor thing," she said softly. But then she frowned. "If the witch just cursed the men to lose their wives, what am I doing here?"

"That's the next part of the story," Mary said softly. "You see, Morag didn't truly want to cause all that death and suffering. She simply wanted to frighten the Laird into allowing her to return to her love, for the two of them to be together. She had every intention of lifting the curse the moment the Laird relented on his law against her seeing her love. But unfortunately, she misjudged the consequences of her action. She was taken prisoner and executed before she could reverse the curse. With her dying breath, we learned, she attempted a reversal — she managed to say that the loves of the MacClaran men would return to them... but she didn't say how, or from whence."

Audra gazed at Mary in the suddenly eerie silence of the little room, feeling oddly cold despite the crackling of the fresh little fire in the grate. "So — they get pulled back from the future, somehow? How?"

"Our theory is that you are all descendants of the lost women — distant family members, at any rate, who bear them such a close resemblance either by chance or by magic." Mary folded her hands, looking thoughtful. "Some of the more magically inclined women are convinced it's magic... I'd have a talk with them if I were you."

Despite her weariness — and wariness of meeting a dozen strangers — Audra felt curiosity blossom in her at the prospect of meeting women who were interested in magic. She'd always been fascinated by witchcraft and spellcasting... was it possible that in this strange place, of all places, she might find some friends who shared her interests? "I'd like that," she said softly. "I've always been — I

mean, I'm a Pagan, kind of, so..."

But Mary was frowning. "Be careful who you mention that to, dear," she said softly, reaching out to touch the back of her hand, just lightly. "All sorts are welcome here, of course, regardless of their beliefs, but... well, there are some who might overhear you saying so and leap to some very dangerous conclusions. We've had our share of trouble with witch-hunters over the years, I promise you. Women from the future, with all kinds of strange and wonderful knowledge..." She sighed. "It can be dangerous. Promise me you'll be careful?"

Audra nodded, feeling a chill running down her spine. "Of course. I don't want anyone to be in any danger because of me."

"Good girl," Mary said approvingly... and though Audra appreciated the sentiment, she still found it a little grating. Was she destined to be an obedient child for her entire life — even here, in a medieval castle, hundreds of years before her parents had even existed? "We'll talk more soon, I hope. For now, you'll need to get some sleep, I'd warrant. You look dead on your feet."

"Thank you," she said softly, reaching out to touch Mary's hand. "For explaining how I got here. It helps, to know."

Mary smiled. "You'll have plenty more questions, I'm sure," she said softly. "But those can wait until you've rested."

There was something about her words that annoyed Audra, the implication that she was too sleepy to focus, like a child... but when she opened her mouth to protest, all that came out was an enormous yawn. Mary chuckled softly as she got up and padded out of the room, lingering in the doorway long enough to tell her she'd be back sometime the next morning to help her with her gown. Audra had just enough time to wonder at what she meant by that — and to wonder how she'd look in one of the beautiful medieval gowns that Mary had been wearing — before her exhaustion truly got the better of her. It was all she could do to pull down the sheets and climb properly into the bed, yawning again and again before she finally settled her head on the pillow and fell into a deep, restful sleep.

It was troubled, though, by dreams. She wasn't usually much of a dreamer — the dreams she did remember were usually strange, fragmented things, just assemblages of her memories from the day and not much more. Once she'd read that dreams were just the mind's way of processing memories, of filing them neatly away to be accessed later — the transition from short-term memory to long-term memory all went on in your sleep, it seemed. But these dreams... these were different. She couldn't remember any part of what she was dreaming about... standing on the edge of a cliff, the wind whipping at her full skirts and tearing her hair loose from the careful way she'd pinned it up. The sky was dark and gray, a storm clearly on the way, and when

she looked out over the ocean before her she knew two things — one, that she knew that view better than any other, that she'd gazed out over it countless times... and two, that she'd never been there before in her life.

That might have caused her a little confusion, that obvious discrepancy — if it wasn't for the abject despair that was gripping her, settled in her chest like a wild animal, lingering and pressing on the deepest part of her. She couldn't live with it; she knew that much... couldn't live any longer with the misery in her heart. But what had caused it? Somehow, the misery obscured even that, hid even its origins from her as she stood and gazed over the ocean and tried to gather her wits for the inevitable next step...

And Audra sat bolt upright in bed, muffling a scream of fear as she felt her body lurch over the edge of the cliff and out into darkness. Her heart pounding, her fists clenched in the sheets — it took her a few minutes to come down from the adrenaline spike, to remember where she was. Not on a cliffside, screaming into the dark, uncaring gray sky beyond... not dressed in full skirts that whipped around her ankles, no. She was lying in a soft, warm, comfortable bed, with a little sunlight trickling through the window and a fire burned out completely in the grate ahead of her. She breathed in and out, trying to settle herself, her memories from the previous night finally rushing back in to cure her utter disorientation.

So, it hadn't been a dream, she thought dully. Unless the dream she'd just had — the strange, dark dream on the cliffside — was somehow a dream within a dream... but that kind of thing only happened in movies, didn't it? And what she was living wasn't a movie... though it was about as far-fetched as any film she'd ever seen, that was for sure. She was here, in medieval Scotland, in a room that had been prepared for her by a woman who'd casually chatted to her about the witchcraft that had brought her here, summoned by the blood of an ancestor some five hundred years ago...

And there was a soft tapping on her door, now. Just in time, too — she had a suspicion she'd been about to start spiraling, and when she called for her guest to come in, she was pleased to see Mary's familiar face, smiling at her gently with a warmth in those bright green eyes that went some way to dismissing the lingering dread from her dream. God, she'd felt so awful. Even on her worst days, she'd never felt such a crushing despair in all her days... and some of what she was feeling must have shown on her face, because Mary frowned a little, tilting her head.

"Are you alright, Audra? Are you feeling well?"

"I'm fine," she said quickly, shaking her head. "Just slept a little strangely."

"Dreams?" Mary asked immediately, her voice so sharp that it made Audra flinch.

"How did you know?"

The woman smiled, though there was a worried look on her face. "You're not the only one who's had strange dreams on her arrival here."

Audra shivered. "Does it wear off? I didn't love it."

But Mary only shrugged, her face cryptic. "First things first," was all she said, turning to the dresser that stood in the far corner of the room. "Let's get you dressed."

It was a surprisingly complicated affair — Audra had initially felt a little offended that Mary thought she'd need so much help, but as layer after layer was applied to her body, she realized that she'd never have been able to figure this out by herself. But eventually, she was fully dressed — and though she acknowledged she'd probably need a few more run-throughs with Mary's assistance, she could vaguely see how it all worked.

"The style suits you," Mary said softly, smiling at her and beckoning for her to look into a mirror on the inside of the dresser's door. Sure enough, Audra's eyes widened when she took herself in. The shape of her waist, the careful outlining of her bosom... she flushed a little at how low-cut the dress was, automatically putting a hand over her ample cleavage, and Mary chuckled.

"All of you ladies from the future react the same way," she said, shaking her head. "But you'll dress in things that outline your lower body without so much as blinking."

"I guess a lot's changed," Audra said faintly, staring at herself in the mirror and feeling more than a little overwhelmed about the future she was facing, here in the distant past.

**B**ut Mary didn't leave her there to wallow in her own anxieties.

Briskly, she led her out of the room, and the two of them set about a brief but thorough tour of the castle. Mary showed her along the hallways, showed her the staircases that led up to the higher levels, explaining as they went that the castle was home to the whole extended MacClaran clan — as well as their men, soldiers who guarded the wall and kept the neighborhood safe, too. She felt a chill run down her spine.

"Against who?"

Mary chuckled. "Good question. Historically, the English... though there's something of an uneasy peace at the moment with our Lord Weatherby."

Audra's eyes widened. "He owned the house I was working at!"

"I've heard that Weatherby Manor survived," Mary agreed, shaking her head with a look of vivid disgust. "Shocks me that nobody saw fit to preserve the Keep in the same way, but I suppose that's history."

They spent the rest of the morning looking around the castle. Audra was particularly interested in the stonework, in the way the castle had been designed and built without any of the modern technologies she was learning about as a contemporary student of architecture — it really was a technological wonder, though she couldn't help but frown at a few undoubtedly modern touches. Was she misremembering her textbooks? She couldn't be — and when she questioned Mary, the woman only grinned.

"We've got our Fiona to thank for those," she said, her eyes sparkling. "She's made more than a few improvements around the place. Laird Donal's wife," she explained, "and another of you time-stranded women."

Audra's eyes widened. It all made sense now — another woman from the future had made these improvements. She frowned, wondering if that had done anything problematic to the timeline —

what if a modern architect had found these modern touches in an ancient ruin? Wouldn't it cause suspicion or upset? Then again, she supposed it hadn't — or she would have heard about it. Funny, that. Hard to get her head around... and she was quickly distracted from any more questions by Mary suggesting a quick lunch.

She ought to have known from the tone of Mary's voice that something a bit beyond lunch was on offer — and sure enough, when they entered the now-crowded dining hall for the midday meal, her eyes widened at the sight that greeted them at the table closest to the door. The whole table was full of women — at least ten of them, all dressed in gorgeous medieval gowns, and all of them with their eyes laser-focused on Audra. If she hadn't guessed that these were the other women stranded in time from their keen interest, the first ten seconds of meeting them would have done the trick — she'd never felt more grateful to hear a series of American accents in her whole life. It was amazing, what could make you feel homesick, even after a few days.

There were ten women there, overall, and she found herself reeling as she tried to remember their names. There seemed to be a range of ages, with a group of women in their forties and fifties seated at one end of the table, all the way down to a cluster of younger women at the other end — but all of them were American, and all of them clasped her hand warmly and told her how welcome she was, how happy they were to see her. It was strange, how welcoming... and how overwhelming... the whole lunch was, and Audra could feel her face flushing brightly when she finally took her seat at the table.

"Tell us about yourself," said the woman at the head of the table — she was maybe thirty, with pale blonde hair and a pair of glasses perched on her nose. This was Fiona, Laird Donal's wife — there was a sharpness to her gaze that Audra found intimidating in the same way she was intimidated by her lecturers at college. "How did you get here?"

"Got lost in the woods," she said faintly. "There was all this fog, and then before I knew it — two men on horses. I thought they were playing a prank on me at first."

"What were you doing here?" That was Scarlet, whose platinum-blond pixie cut had drawn Audra's attention immediately. "I can't get over the fact that we're all Americans, that's all —"

"I was on a working holiday," she said faintly, feeling ridiculous. "It's insane. I'd never left Ohio before, and the minute I set foot outside my door — this happens."

"A bigger trip than you bargained for, hm?" The tall, slender woman who'd spoken was the second most recent arrival, Audra had learned from the quick introductions Mary had made — her name was Brianna, and she'd been a police officer back in the future. "It was a

similar situation for me."

"We were all brought here," Helena said, eyes thoughtful. "Either on a holiday, or for research, or because we were interested in something... I wanted to see the sandstone caves," she added, gesturing vaguely toward where Audra assumed the caves were. "I saw a lot more of them than I bargained for, in the end."

"That is not entirely true, a few of us were still in the states when we were pulled here, but I do think it's fate that we've all found our way here. We were meant to be here in this time." That came from one of the older women.

There were three of them — they sat down one end of the table together, a thoughtful trio, and though they'd warmly introduced themselves, they seemed content to let the younger women engage her in chatter instead of getting too intense about it themselves. The eldest was Audrina, who had been the first of the time-stranded women to arrive — her shorter, curvy friend with dark hair and a broad smile was Cora, Audra remembered because her cousin had the same name and Marianne was the third, a tall, striking woman with strong features and straight dark hair. It was Marianne who'd spoken, and she spoke so plainly and simply that it struck the rest of the women into a quiet, reflective silence for a minute.

"Fate," Audra said softly. "I've always believed in fate."

"Cora's my cousin, I was doing a reading to find her when she went missing and ended up here. I suppose if fate hadn't meant for me to be here, then I wouldn't have been brought through," Marianne said with a shrug of her shoulders. There was a playful light in her eyes when she added: "Of course, some of us are more interested in tales of the supernatural than others..."

That drew an affectionate eye-roll from a few of the women — some of whom had been introduced as scientists and medical workers. But Audra leaned forward, curious despite herself. "I've always been interested in Paganism, actually," she said quickly, realizing with a giddy rush that she didn't need to keep this particular interest secret any more. After all, what were her parents going to do? They hadn't even been born yet — they were hundreds of miles and hundreds of years away from her. "In witchcraft and spells and all that stuff. I know it's silly," she added, aware of the amused eyes of some of the younger women on her. "I just... I've always thought it's neat."

"Do you practice?"

That surprised her — Delilah, who'd been quiet thus far, a tall woman with Marianne's straight dark hair, though her facial structure and blue eyes made her look quite different from the older woman in all other regards. She was a folklorist, Audra remembered from their brief introduction, an expert in the myths and legends of the area.

"No, no," she said quickly, suddenly feeling like a poser. "I mean, I'm interested in it, but... well, I live with my parents," she added, suddenly feeling like a teenager again. "And they wouldn't approve. They..." She trailed off. God, how did you even start about a family situation like hers? She took a deep breath, aware of the curious eyes of the table on her. "Well, they're pretty protective. And kind of religious." Not that that had been the main problem — they were church-goers, of course, but nothing too extreme — but they certainly wouldn't have thought kindly of any witchcraft from their only daughter, she knew that for a fact.

"I know what that feels like," Delilah said with a sympathetic smile. "I had to go to university before my parents took my folklore obsession seriously."

"We'll talk more about this later," Marianne said, eyes dancing mischievously in a way that made Audra very curious about what the older woman could mean. She'd been exchanging meaningful glances with Helena, Fiona, and Delilah, and Audra wondered exactly what kind of door she'd opened by mentioning her interest in all things Pagan.

But that was just about the end of the interrogation — at least when it came to details about Audra, with the women clearly not wanting to overwhelm her too much with questions about where she was from, what she did, and of course her family, which remained something of a sore subject. What they were fascinated by, though, was news from the future. All the women, from what she could gauge, had gone missing from the future at earlier points in the timeline than she had — it seemed to correspond roughly with the times they'd arrived in medieval Scotland, as though all of them had traveled the exact same length of time, though leaving and arriving at slightly different points. They spent a lot of the rest of the lunch quizzing her about news and current affairs. They started off asking for serious details about tv shows and music, not really caring about politics, except to ask who was president, or foreign affairs, thankfully. She did her best to answer their questions, but some of it she didn't actually know, because she hadn't been allowed to watch some of the shows.

"She could be making it up, you know," Scarlet pointed out with an amused smile dancing across her pretty face when Audra confessed to not knowing the answer to a particular question. "Audra, feel free to lie to us as much as you like. It's not like there's any way of us finding out you were fibbing... not unless we live five hundred years."

They quickly moved on to celebrity gossip, which wasn't a great subject for Audra, who wasn't an avid celebrity watcher, but thanks to the efforts of a couple of friends of hers from college she was able to do a decent job of conveying some celebrity gossip to the younger



women at the table. By the time they'd all finished their lunch, she was feeling worn out... pleased to have made so many new friends, of course, but a little exhausted by the interrogation.

"I can't believe David Bowie died, that makes me so sad," Marianne murmured to Cora.

Cora patted her hand. "Look at it this way, for us, he hasn't even been born yet!"

"True," she said with a laugh.

Audra shook her head trying to take in all of their chatter, but it was a bit overwhelming.

"It'll feel less insane next time," Scarlet promised her with a wink.

She smiled wanly as the women all bid her a good day, promising to check in with her over dinner or later in the week. Something was troubling her... something that stayed with her even as she made her way back up the stairs toward her little room, keen for some time to herself before she got on with the rest of her day. What had Scarlet meant, no way of telling if she was telling the truth about the future unless they lived five hundred years? Did that mean there was no way back to the future?

Was she stuck here for good?

No wonder the women had been so nice to her, she thought

faintly as she settled into her room again, loosening the various bindings on her gown to make it a little more comfortable to settle down on her neatly made bed. The regular room service was something she could get used to at least, she thought distantly, but it barely raised a smile on her face. It had been easy enough to accept that she was here — she'd never received such overwhelming evidence in favor of the existence of magic in her life, of course, but how could she deny the evidence of her own eyes? Magic was real, she'd traveled through time — fair enough. She'd been handling that well enough. But the realization that there was likely no way back... that was a harder pill to swallow.

But it made sense, didn't it? The women had all been so kind, so friendly, so warm to her... they'd been trying to make her feel better about the fact that she was stranded here, in this strange place, never to see her family or friends again, her whole future life completely vanished, as though it had melted away into the fog... she felt her heart pounding as her eyes flew to where her clothes were folded neatly, the cardigan and dress she'd been wearing when she'd come through the fog. Feeling a little mad, she reached into the pockets of her cardigan to get her phone out and shut her eyes sadly when she realized that the battery was dead. That was it, then. Nowhere to charge a phone in medieval Scotland... all the photos she'd had, all the messages from her parents, all gone... a bittersweet memory. She laughed aloud, too, when she reached into the pocket again and discovered that she'd absent-mindedly put her phone's charger into her pocket, too. Great. All she had to do was find an outlet and she'd be all set...

She couldn't think about this. Not now. It was all just too much to handle. So, gritting her teeth, she got to her feet and set off on a long, meandering walk around the castle. It had always made her feel better

to be in motion — whenever she'd had a fight with her parents, or was struggling at school or college, a long brisk walk had always been her best bet for feeling better. Maybe it would work now... though she'd never faced anything as serious as being trapped five hundred years in the past before, what alternative did she have?

The walk didn't exactly make her feel better, but it certainly distracted her. There was just so much going on — so many strange things to gawk at, so many curious faces to gawk straight back at her. Mary had assured her that the people of the Keep were used to strange women turning up every few months or years — what she hadn't mentioned was how curious the people of the Keep would be about who she was... and, more to the point, who she had been. Several of them asked which of the MacClaran men she'd been brought back for, and she got into the habit of laughing and saying she wasn't sure yet — because the whole subject felt vaguely uncomfortable. Was she really some kind of... supernatural mail-order bride, brought back through time to replace a lost woman? She was more than that. There was more to her than that.

But she had to admit, she was looking forward to seeing Brian and his brother Duncan again, now that she was a little more familiar with exactly what was going on. So, when she was called down to dinner, she was thrilled to be told by the soft-spoken Mary that she'd be dining at the Laird's table — along with Duncan and Brian, both of whom were being formally welcomed back to the Keep after their long absence. Mary's eyes sparkled knowingly when she added that part, and Audra couldn't resist asking.

"What did they do that got them such a reputation as troublemakers?"

"It wasn't any one thing," Mary said, lowering her voice a little as the two of them headed down the stairs together. "It was the cumulative effect. The constant pranks, the slacking off their duties... oh, and they were wicked womanizers. Half the girls in the village fell victim to their charms... and half the time one would pretend it was the other that the girl had fallen for, just to get out of any responsibility for the hearts they'd broken."

Audra felt her heart sinking. She'd quite liked Brian and Duncan when she'd met them — they seemed like friendly, handsome young men. Could they really have been so cruel, so unkind to local girls? That was a long time ago, she supposed, biting worriedly at her lower lip. Maybe they'd changed since then. Brian at least couldn't have been that much of a womanizer, right? After all, he'd fallen in love and gotten married... to a woman he was clearly still very much in love with. Why did that cause a pang of dismay, deep in her chest?

At any rate, she put all that gossip aside when they headed into the

main hall, determined to be polite and friendly. After all, she was dining at the table of the Laird, which she understood to be quite a big deal. Donal gave her a friendly smile and a nod when she arrived, and Fiona sitting at his side tipped her a wink that made her grin. Maybe things weren't so formal after all... and when she took her offered seat at the table, it wasn't long before one of the twins sat down at her right-hand side.

"Good evening, Audra," he said.

She squinted at him closely, doing her level best to work it out. God, they really did look so alike... a smile danced across his face.

"You're trying to work out which one I am, aren't you?"

"I'm doing my best," she protested, feeling a mixture of embarrassment and amusement. The other twin moved up beside her, clearly wanting to take the seat to her left — but it had already been occupied by Mary, who gave him a bland little smile that Audra sensed concealed a great deal of lingering resentment. Looking slightly irritated, the other twin sat down by his brother instead. With both of them in her field of vision, any certainty that she'd figured out who she was talking to faded, and she heaved a sigh. "It's no good. You're identical."

"Guess, then," said the first twin, smiling encouragement at her. She studied him for a long moment, feeling her heart do a giddy little backflip in her chest at the excuse to stare at him so brazenly.

"You're ... Brian," she said finally.

"Oh yes? And what makes you think that?" asked the other twin, eyebrow raised. She looked at him closely for a moment. The truth was that there was a lingering sadness in Brian's face that even his bright smiles couldn't quite eclipse... and that look was missing from Duncan's expression. But she still wasn't sure of herself... and besides, she didn't want to say something so grim at a happy occasion.

"Just an instinct," she said instead with a shrug of her shoulders. And the twin at her side burst out laughing.

"Very good instincts! I'm Brian," he said, giving her a wink. "How has your first day in the Keep been?"

"Kind of overwhelming," she said faintly, looking around the great hall around them and the unfamiliar food that was being served up. "I met all of the other women who've been brought here." She hesitated. "They're all married."

"Oh, aye. They tend to fall for the man whose lost love they were sent to replace, isn't that right, Brian?" That was Duncan, elbowing his brother in the ribs... and Brian looked a little uncomfortable, covering the discomfiture with a laugh.

"No pressure though, right?" Audra said drily. "I was only brought here by supernatural powers to replace your wife, but ... you know,

we can just be friends."

Brian was chuckling when he looked at her, and she could see gratitude in those bright blue eyes. "I'd worried that you might find it all a bit... strange."

"Oh, it's incredibly strange. But I bet it's stranger for you, right? With me looking just like Annie, and everything?"

"Aye, it's a little strange," he said softly, looking at her with that slightly wistful expression she was getting to know. "But I'm working on it. And the more time I spend with you, the more I know that you're not her. And I'm looking forward to knowing you better, Audra, if that's not too forward."

Too forward? She could feel a blush rising to her cheeks and she took a sip of her wine to hide it, feeling her heart pounding in her chest. Was he saying he was... what? Interested in her? She couldn't say she wasn't interested in him as well ... both of them, really, what with how handsome they were... but was that really true? she wondered. Sure, they looked the same... but Duncan didn't draw her interest quite the same way that Brian did. There was just something about Brian that drew her more toward him.

"I suppose I know what it feels like," she said thoughtfully, looking between the two of them. "Or at least I can imagine. Do I look as much like Annie as you look like Duncan?"

"Aye," Duncan said, leaning in a little.

There was a restlessness in him, an impatience in his movements, as though he was frustrated by where he'd been placed at the table. She thought back to the way he'd tried to sit right beside her — was it possible that Duncan, too, was interested in her? That made her frown. She didn't especially want to be competed over by two enormous men — she barely knew whether she wanted to entertain the advances of one of them, let alone both.

"Aye, you're the spitting image. Same as us."

"At least you have the accent to tell us apart," Audra said drily. "If one of you could start speaking in an American accent that would be great."

"It might take some study," Brian said with a chuckle. "But I'm beginning to see the differences between you and Annie — though you're just as fair as she was."

Duncan snorted; his mouth full of food. "And they call me the womanizer."

Audra bit her lip, wishing very much that Duncan might butt out of the conversation for a minute or two. She was enjoying the chance to talk to Brian more than she'd thought she would... it was a shame his brother was so determined to keep jumping in. They talked a little more as dinner continued — she was interested to learn more about

Annie, and eventually Duncan was distracted by a conversation further down the table about life on the Wall and they were able to speak uninterrupted.

"She was the sweetest person I ever knew," Brian explained once Duncan was adequately distracted, a smile playing about his lips as he remembered his wife. "Absolutely devoted to her family, to her mother and father... that was why we settled on Skye, because she couldn't bear to be away from them again. She said that they'd protected her for most of her life — it was her turn to protect them."

Audra felt an unexpected lump in her throat. She'd always thought that that would be her future... she'd leave home long enough to get a good job, then come home and care for her parents in their eventual old age. But now, with her stuck here for the rest of her life... who was going to care for them? "That's lovely," she said softly. "Did she have any siblings?"

"She was their first and only," Brian said, shaking his head.

"Me too." Audra smiled. "Maybe she and I have more in common than just our good looks."

Brian chuckled at that... and then Duncan was back, nattering on at them about something or other, and Audra turned her attention back to her meal, lost in thought. She'd always been interested in the concept of reincarnation — she knew so little about it, but some part of it had always made a strange kind of sense to her, the idea that souls were born and reborn through the years. Was it possible that she really was Annie, returned in some strange way to this time? She resolved to learn more about her lookalike, to really interrogate the prospect — and to chat with some of the more magically inclined women about it, too.

Who knew? This particular project might even mean that she might end up needing to spend more time alone with Brian...

**I**t was a pleasant dinner, in the end, and she found herself feeling

oddly peaceful as she headed up the stairs to bed afterwards. It was something about spending time with Brian that soothed her worries... though now she was alone, she could feel the anxiety about being stuck here beginning to creep in around the edges again. It wasn't the place that was the problem... she was enjoying exploring the castle, and she honestly liked the people she'd met. And she'd surprised herself, too, with how well she'd adjusted to such an extreme shift in her situation. No — it wasn't being here that was the problem.

It was the suspicion that she was here for good... and that she'd never be able to speak to her parents again, to make any kind of peace with them. That was what was really getting to her. She even got her phone out again, stared down at its dark screen where she could see her worried face reflected in the glass. Stupid, really... she'd been the one who'd insisted on getting the fanciest model with all the latest features. Maybe if she'd picked an older, more reliable phone with more battery life, it would have lasted a little longer... maybe she'd even be able to have a look at some photos of her old life, just quickly, just to remind herself of who she'd been...

And to her dismay, she saw tears dripping onto the dark screen. Crying, again? It was exasperating... but at least she was alone. And it felt good to cry. Felt good to let out some of the emotion that had built up over the tumultuous last few hours... so she tucked herself up in bed and let herself shake with sobs, let the grief thunder through her, the knowledge that she'd never go back home again, never see her family and friends... the knowledge that she was stuck here, in this bizarre if fascinating place, that she would have to build a whole new life from the ground up...

This wasn't the kind of adventure she'd had in mind when she'd applied for a summer job, she thought, almost laughing as she gasped for breath and dashed the tears away from her face. Funny, how

quickly crying could turn into laughing... and vice versa. There was a sleepy kind of peace here, in the aftermath of her crying fit, and she took advantage of it to settle down into bed, tears drying on her cheeks as she felt herself drift off into a deep, restful sleep.

More dreams — vaguer, this time, more faint. She was still on the cliffside, still gazing out over the stormy seas before her, still somehow gripped by a dread and a misery the likes of which she'd never felt before... but this time, her vision was blurred, as though there was thin fabric or something obscuring her vision. And she could feel someone standing by her side... feel the warmth of a body there, though it wasn't a comforting warmth. Quite the opposite. Whoever he was, she didn't want him to be there... she hated him, feared him, felt a deep and bone-crushing guilt and shame and horror at the very thought of looking at his face...

And Audra sat bolt upright in bed, the early morning sunlight making her blink, utterly disoriented. What a strange dream... but with everything they'd discussed the day before, she couldn't help but wonder if there was more to it than simply stress or her brain coping with a traumatic experience. Didn't the word 'trauma' come from the word 'dream'? She'd read that once...

Deep in thought, she got up and set about dressing for breakfast, pleased to discover that though the process was still fraught, it all came a little easier than it had the day before. She still had to call for a servant to help her with a little of the lacing, of course, but once that part was out of the way she was happy with her efforts. And she was growing fond of this gown, too... it was a deep gray color that set off her dark hair nicely, and she spent a little time combing it, wanting to look her best for breakfast.

For everyone at breakfast, of course. Not anyone in particular.

To her surprise, she ran into Brian in the entrance hall — it was almost as though he'd been waiting for her, and though she hesitated for a moment before speaking his name, he was quick to assure her that she'd assumed his identity correctly. He looked freshly shaven, and she found herself hoping that Duncan hadn't shaved — if one of them would start sporting a beard, it would really help her out a lot.

"Where's your brother this morning?"

"Arguing with the Captain of the Guard," Brian said with a roll of his eyes as they headed into breakfast together. It felt nice, walking at his side... there was something pleasing about how much taller he was than her, about the automatic way he shortened his stride so that she didn't have to hurry to keep up with him. "He wants us to make ourselves useful now that we're back in the Keep, but Duncan doesn't much fancy it."

"And you?"



"I've wanted to be on the Watch since I was a child," Brian told her with a soft smile playing about his bright blue eyes. "I'll be thrilled to be a conscript."

"Doesn't it get boring, just... standing on the Wall making sure nobody attacks the castle?" she asked, curious about the work done by the armored men she so often saw circling the Keep.

Brian shook his head immediately. "There's a lot more to it than that. The Watch take care of the surrounding area, not just the Keep. They keep the roads safe for travelers, take care of any trouble in the village, rout bandits and robbers... there's rarely a dull period in the Watch."

"Sounds like being a cop," she said softly, thinking back to a friend of hers in high school who'd been determined to join the police force ever since she'd been a child. "Maybe I should find a job, too."

Brian chuckled as they settled in for breakfast. "I'm sure there's no shortage of work around the Keep if you're simply wanting to keep your hands busy," he said, nodding to the servants bustling back and forth, and to Mary, who was keeping a watchful eye over proceedings. "Mary could always use additional apprentices. But I'd imagine you've all kinds of useful skills you could share with us, being from the future and all."

She laughed, thinking of her useless brick of a phone. It was still sitting on her bedside table upstairs — she couldn't bring herself to do anything else with it. "Oh, yeah. I'm really good with Excel, I bet that'll come in handy."

Brian looked at her blankly, and she couldn't help but giggle.

"Sorry. Future joke. The other women would be laughing, I promise."

"I'm sure." He tilted his head, smiling at her. "Are you busy today, Audra? I was going to offer to show you around the Keep if you're not otherwise occupied."

That sounded awfully like a date. She bit her lip on the instinct to ask if his brother would be joining them — she didn't want him to assume that that was something she'd actually want to happen.

"That would be lovely," she said, fighting the urge to blush.

God, she wished her parents had let her date in high school. It was bad enough dealing with the brand-new setting ... let alone dating for literally the first time ever. If that was even what this was, of course. How was she supposed to know the difference between a medieval man being friendly and a medieval man trying to court her? For all she knew, she'd just accepted the equivalent of a marriage proposal. He was certainly speaking formally enough about what was, effectively, a walk around the Keep. She resolved to talk with her new friends later, to compare a few notes about medieval

communications... but for now, she forced herself to stay calm.

Did it complicate things a little, her looking just like his dead wife? Probably, right? He'd made it clear that he knew that she and Annie were very different people... but that didn't seem to be stopping him from seeking out her company. And did she mind? The answer, of course, was that she didn't mind at all... but maybe she should, she thought with a frown. What would her mother say?

That wasn't a useful question at all, she reflected as the two of them finished their breakfast then headed outside the Keep and across the courtyard. Her mother would say all kinds of unhelpful things, probably summarizing by telling her to go straight back to her room and lock the door until every man on the planet had died of old age. Only then would the world be safe. Well, her mother wasn't here. Her mother wasn't even born yet. And she liked Brian. And besides... he was probably the person who'd known her past self if that really was what Annie was to her best. What better person to ask about her predecessor, to find out if she really might be some kind of spiritual descendant of the woman?

The fact that he gave her butterflies was just a fun little bonus that was all.

But to her acute dismay, they were barely through the gate of the Keep before there was a shout behind them. Sure enough, here came Duncan. He, at least, wasn't freshly shaved like Brian was, so she didn't have to worry about keeping track of who was who for today... but still, she was fighting to hide her vexation as he came loping up to join them, a bright smile on his face that theoretically should have been just as handsome as Brian's smile, but somehow managed to fall short.

"Going off for a walk just the two of you, hm?" he asked, raising an eyebrow as he took the two of them in. "People will talk. I do admire a woman who takes liberties, though, Annie — oops! I mean Audra, of course."

Brian gritted his teeth. "Why don't you join us, Duncan? We were just going to walk around the Keep. Audra didn't get a proper look at the outside of the wall the other night."

She fought to hide her disappointment as Duncan fell into step beside them. Trust her to get a crush on the one guy in the entire castle who came with an annoying sidekick. But it was worse than that. What was it about Duncan that made her feel like there was something he wasn't telling them?

What was it about him that made her distrust him?

Audra fell into bed that night feeling thoroughly aggrieved. If

that had been a first date... well, she was looking forward to the second date, that was all she could say. If there even would be one.

Duncan had followed them around for what felt like the entire damn morning, and the more the time had dragged on, the clearer it had become that he intended to remain as a third wheel for the rest of the day. Audra was torn between enjoyment of Brian's company and resentment of Duncan for being present. It felt like everything Brian said, Duncan had to jump in with a comment, usually an attempt to one-up his brother in some way... or else remind him forcefully that Audra wasn't Annie. There was a strange possessiveness to the way he spoke, something that put her teeth on edge. She got the distinct impression — not that he ever did anything to make it explicit — that he felt like he was competing with his brother for her favor.

Well, he'd lost that competition by the time they made a single lap of the Keep. She could barely listen to what Brian was telling her about the stonework, so distracted had she been by Duncan's blithering on. It was difficult to talk to Brian about Annie, to learn anything about her that might help her figure out whether she truly was a reincarnation of the woman, because Duncan was so determined to keep cutting them off.

But it got even worse when they headed inside to have a wander around the Keep itself. Brian, for his part, was nothing but polite when they encountered servants, but Duncan seemed determined to prove how high status he was by ordering them around. The first servant they encountered was a groom at the stables, busy tacking a horse up for a guard who was standing nearby — Duncan felt it necessary to interrogate the man about how many horses there were in the stable, apparently with the intention of making sure his own horse was being treated well. The poor young man, who'd clearly been instructed to obey men of the MacClaran clan, had been torn between

continuing with the task he was in the middle of and hurrying off to find out how Duncan's horse was faring — Audra had to intervene, gritting her teeth as she distracted Duncan long enough to let the groom go about his business.

She'd hoped that they'd be spared a little of Duncan's nonsense at lunch — part of her had even hoped he might leave them to eat by themselves, perhaps getting the hint from her seething silence in response to just about every comment he made — but no, lunch only seemed to make him worse. He kept grabbing servants physically by the arm when they passed their table, instructing them to bring all kinds of things over to the table — things he was more than capable of getting for himself, Brian said at one point, clearly a little annoyed by his brother. By mid-afternoon, she'd had enough — she made her excuses and left the two of them to their own devices, hastening up the stairs. It wasn't exactly the ending to their 'date', if that was really what it had been, that she'd envisioned.

But what could Audra say to Brian to prevent such a thing happening again? Hey, could you do me a favor and make sure your twin brother stays the hell away from us next time? For all she knew, Duncan accompanying them had been important, somehow, for decorum. Hadn't she read somewhere that a man and woman going anywhere alone together was scandalous, somehow? Should she have asked one of the other women to 'chaperone' her and Brian if they ended up spending more time together? Was that what Duncan had been doing? It just didn't make sense. The overall impression she got was that Duncan was clingy when it came to his brother — that he'd had all his attention to himself over the last few years, ever since Annie's death, and that he didn't like sharing that attention with another person.

She was so frustrated that she ended up taking a long afternoon nap to get away from her own vexation and woke blearily just before dinner. Sure enough, the long nap meant that she was wide awake when bedtime came, and she'd just resigned herself to a long night sitting up reading one of the huge tomes of folklore that Helena had lent her when there came a soft tapping at her bedroom door.

Who could that be? she wondered. One of the servants, perhaps, checking in on her? But there was already a fire lit in her grate, and her bed had been neatly made when she'd returned to her room after dinner... what could a servant need? Maybe it was Mary, making sure she was settling in okay. Part of her hoped, just briefly, that it might be Brian... here to make a serious apology for how annoying his brother had been on their walk that afternoon, and to spend some real quality time alone with her. A flush rose to her cheeks and her heart was beating hard when she opened the door... but of course, it wasn't

Brian. Not this late at night, not coming to her alone... that would have been scandalous, surely. She fought to keep the disappointment from her face.

The four visitors slipped into her room, their eyes gleaming with an energy she couldn't help but find intriguing. Marianne led them — Fiona, Helena, and Delilah were behind her, the three of them dressed in simple cotton shifts with cloaks around their shoulders... rather different from the attire that she'd gotten used to seeing them in, the elaborate gowns. She was in a nightgown herself, a cotton shift that she'd gotten into the habit of sleeping in, and she blinked with mild confusion at them.

"Are we having a slumber party? Did I miss a memo?"

Helena laughed, her pretty face crinkling. "Slumber party. I'd forgotten about those."

"I told you that we'd talk more about magic later, didn't I?" Marianne asked, her eyes twinkling.

"Tell us if this is too much," Fiona said firmly.

She sat down on the edge of Audra's bed and Audra followed, feeling oddly excited by the strange, hushed atmosphere of excitement among the four women.

"There is absolutely no pressure to get involved with this. Honestly, if they'd come to me on my — what, second night here? — and asked me to do this, I'd ... have definitely thought twice," Helena said.

"You'd have done it, though," Delilah said with a grin.

"Oh, absolutely, but — you get my point. You can say no."

"What am I saying no to?"

"We've taken to performing a ritual," Marianne explained, her voice low as though worried about being overheard — but by whom?

There was only the dark night outside the window, and these thick stone walls didn't let any sounds through at all... Audra shivered, leaning in a little closer.

"A kind of thanks to the powers that be, whenever another of us is brought through to this time safe and sound..." Fiona added.

"Not that we know what those powers are, of course," Delilah said with a shrug. "But it was my — my ancestor, my predecessor — who laid the original spell that brings women back through time, so I figure I owe it to her to give thanks now and then."

"What does it involve?" Audra blinked. None of the women seemed to have spell components with them — she'd always imagined magic involving great leatherbound books, and candles, and mysterious powders and oils in little pots... but the women had only their bodies, and their mischievous grins.

"We dance," Helena said simply. "We go out into the forest, to a

clearing we found where nobody ever goes, and we dance."

"It's behind my former self's cottage." Fiona smiled. "I promise it's well hidden."

"It's a celebration as much as it's a thanksgiving," Delilah said with a smile. "What do you think? Want to join us?"

"Again — completely fine if not."

Audra took a deep breath. It sounded like exactly the kind of thing that would make her mother and father lose their minds with rage if she even considered joining in... she could already hear the long list of problems her mother would have with it before she even got to the religious side of things. Dancing to thank God for something? Absolutely not. What if she caught her death of cold? What if men followed the three of them out there and made untoward assumptions about them all being out there unescorted? What if this led to some kind of devil-worshipping cult the likes of which could scarcely be imagined? Much safer to stay inside, her mental projection of her mother whispered, shaking its head, and tapping its bony fingers on the side of its head. Much safer and more sensible to stay inside where it was safe. Oh, yes. Safer, and more boring, and more likely to make her feel like a trapped bird in a cage instead of a person.

Her parents hadn't been born yet, and Audra had never been dancing in the moonlight before. So, with a broad grin she nodded, hopped to her feet, and grabbed her cardigan from the back of the chair, tucking it tightly around her shoulders. It didn't quite match the dark cloaks the other women were wearing, but she hadn't gotten a cloak yet, and she didn't want to freeze out there — though honestly, with her heart pounding with excitement in her veins, she imagined they wouldn't get too chilly out there.

"Brilliant," Marianne said with a smile, her eyes dancing. "See? I told you she'd be game."

Audra glowed at that. She'd never been described as 'game' in her life — in high school she'd been voted most likely to never leave her hometown, an award that had stung even though it had been meant as a good-natured joke. Well, what would they say if they could see her now? Striding through the halls of a medieval Scottish castle with her time-traveling friends, who — oh, by the way — happened to be witches.

"So, are you guys a coven?" she asked once they were out of the castle and hastening across the courtyard — but none of the women answered. She'd imagined they were heading for the gate — but Marianne stopped her with one hand, pulling the four of them into the shadow of the wall and heading back toward the castle. Sure enough, there was a door set in the wall, barely visible from the courtyard, and they slipped through it and into the darkness. Interesting... not even

Duncan and Brian had showed her this little shortcut. They walked through the wall a ways, the dark a little oppressive and stuffy... but moonlight shone through a grate up ahead and Audra smiled with relief as they emerged into the open field beyond the Keep.

"Quick," Marianne said, and the five of them ran across the field and into the forest, Audra stifling her giggles as they went. It felt so exhilarating, running away like this — almost as though it was against the rules, somehow, as though they were sneaking around without permission. But she sensed, on some level, that it wasn't about permission — it was about knowledge. This was a feminine ritual, she got that vibe distinctly... and if they'd gone through the gate, the men would have known about it. No — this had to be just the five of them. Just women... heading out to dance in the moonlight to give thanks to the forces that had brought them there.

Audra could feel her heart pounding in her chest, the adrenaline doing more than enough to banish the chill of the night as they headed deep into the forest. If she'd been given a million years to think about it, she'd never have guessed that her summer working abroad would have led to a night like this.

**I**t was strange, out in the depths of the forest. She'd expected it to be silent, the moon peering down through the clouds... but instead, it only seemed to get louder as they headed deeper and deeper into the trees. She trusted Marianne to know the way — the older woman looked confident as she strode down a narrow path that had been quite invisible from outside of the stand of trees, and the other three followed her without hesitation, instilling more confidence in Audra. The sound of their footsteps, though, was joined by the rustling of the wind in the leaves, the distant chirping and singing of birds and other creatures that were awake at night... she kept hearing sounds that were almost like footsteps behind them, and she felt a little jumpy when they finally emerged in the clearing that Marianne had mentioned.

Fiona stepped next to her and pointed. "My cottage is that way through the forest. It sits at the very edge of the village."

The clearing was quite wide, perhaps thirty feet in diameter, and the moon shone down from above, lighting the grassy area with silvery light that shone from the women's faces. The five of them moved quietly into the center of the clearing. The other four kept exchanging glances, and Audra raised an eyebrow, a sudden suspicion arising that they weren't telling her something...

"Again, this isn't a mandatory element," Helena said softly, her voice being whipped away by the chill breeze. "But traditionally..."

"Traditionally," Marianne cut in, her voice deeper than Audra had ever heard it and her eyes electric, "we dance sky-clad."

It took Audra a moment to figure out what that meant — and her eyes widened as Marianne unfastened the cloak from around her shoulders and bundled it in her arms, placing it neatly in the center of the clearing. Helena, Fiona, and Delilah followed with their own cloaks — and Audra felt a sympathetic pang of chilliness as she saw the wind caressing their exposed skin. Her mother's voice in the back



of her mind... how inappropriate, getting naked in the depths of a forest. You'll all catch your death of cold, not to mention what a man might think or say or do if he stumbled upon you...

But there were no men here, were there? Just four women, all of whom were now climbing out of their shifts, their skin pale and gleaming in the moonlight... and Audra reminded herself for the tenth time that night that her mother was miles — and centuries — away from this place. This decision wasn't her mother's to make. It was hers. And as she looked at her friends, grinning at each other in the moonlight, she knew — without any feeling of pressure or coercion — what she wanted to do.

Her cardigan hit the ground, and then her nightdress — and Helena uttered a whooping cry of approval, before covering her mouth with her hand, eyes dancing with mirth. Delilah punched the air, too, her infectious grin crossing her face — but Marianne only nodded, approval in her eyes tempered with something else. Fiona too just gave her a nod of approval.

Audra was surprised by how warm she felt, how the cold night air on her naked skin didn't chill her to the bone as she'd expected... and as the four of them stepped out into the clearing, she felt her heart beating exhilaration in her chest.

She'd wondered how they were going to dance without music, but it turned out that nothing could have been less necessary. The four of them began to move, swaying back and forth in the clearing, and as their energy built and grew, Audra found that her body seemed to naturally find ways of moving that were pleasant. The soft grass felt so delicious against her feet — every step seemed to resonate, seemed to reverberate down through the earth and feed back into her with fresh energy that she channeled back into a dance that started out slow, but grew steadily in intensity and tempo. And in the end, she had no idea how long the four of them danced out there... her thoughts faded and then disappeared until her entire mind was full of the dance, of the cloudy sky above them, the moonlight on their skin and the way the wind itself seemed to dance with them, kissing their skin and twirling them back and forth...

At some point, the five of them found themselves in the center of the circle again, gasping for breath... and just like that, it was over, as quickly as it had begun. Audra felt a shiver run down her spine, the cool air actually chilling her for the first time in what felt like hours, and just like that the five of them were dressing, exchanging warm smiles with each other, content to let what they'd enjoyed together speak for itself for the time being. Bundled up warmly again, her breath still coming hard in her chest from their exertions and the sweat drying on her skin, Audra followed the four women back into

the forest, back toward the castle again. They walked in silence, though there was a warmth and a familiarity between them that hadn't been there before... and Audra couldn't help but smile when they slipped back through the castle wall, trotted up the stairs and headed for their respective quarters. Before they went, though, they hugged one another... and Marianne whispered in her ear an answer to the question she'd thought had gone unheard, so many hours before.

"Yes, we're a coven," she murmured, sending a thrill down Audra's spine. "And you're a member, if you choose to be."

And with that, the four of them were gone, leaving Audra to return to her room with her whole body alive and buzzing with the joy of what they'd just done, of the strange but delightful ritual they'd indulged in. Ever since she'd started reading about Paganism — online, mostly, or in occasional books in the college library that she'd never dare to bring home — she'd dreamed of being part of something like that. And tonight, those dreams had come true, scratching itches she'd never even thought she'd had...

Maybe this was her purpose here, she thought with a soft smile as she climbed into bed, a great weariness rushing over her. Maybe her role in medieval Scotland was to be ... to be some kind of time witch. Communing with whatever forces kept bringing women back through time, befriending them, helping them through the way that her friends had helped her, tonight... she could see that being a worthy goal. She fell asleep with those thoughts still echoing through her mind, and for once she didn't dream of the cliff's edge, of the open ocean... she dreamed instead of the moon, and the starlight, and the whirling, giddy rush of the dance.

In the morning, she woke to find the castle alive with an energy she hadn't encountered before — servants were rushing this way and that, and she even encountered the Laird himself in the hall, giving instructions while looking decidedly put out. A little too shy to approach him, she nevertheless loitered curiously, overhearing him saying something about a surprise visit... but before she could hear any more, he was gone, leaving her to head into breakfast with her curiosity burning. People seemed simultaneously annoyed and amused by whatever this visit was. Who could it be?

There, sitting at what was rapidly becoming her usual table, was... was it Brian or Duncan? Damn it... the man was wearing something she hadn't seen either brother wear before, and he had enough stubble on his face that she could no longer use clean-shavenness as an indicator of who was who. He smiled at her warmly as she sat down, and she narrowed her eyes, wanting to work it out before she got too deep into conversation with him. If it was Duncan, she was going to

be cold. If it was Brian, though...

"It's me," he said softly, eyes dancing.

She looked closely. "Brian?"

"Aye, well played," he said with a grin.

"I'm getting better."

"I mean, you may be," he said loftily. "Then again, I might be lying to you."

"Are you?" She folded her arms, looking at him harder. "Duncan?"

"Duncan's gone," he said, shaking his head and seeming to drop the ruse — she let herself breathe a sigh of relief, not enjoying that particular game. "I told him to head back to our camp to collect the last of our belongings. He'll be back later this afternoon."

"Great," she said — then flushed, feeling a little embarrassed.

Brian tilted his head, looking curious. She tried to get control of herself. Duncan might annoy her, but he was still Brian's twin brother and clearly his closest friend — she wasn't going to go insulting him to Brian's face.

"I mean, great that you're moving into the Keep officially."

"Aye, though we have to share quarters," he said with a roll of his eyes. "We've been treated as an inseparable pair our whole lives; I suppose it was too much to expect separate quarters."

There was an edge to Brian's disposition as they ate together, and she found herself wishing that Duncan had gone yesterday to collect their belongings from the camp — today, it seemed, Brian wasn't in as good a mood as he'd been in the day before. There'd be plenty of time to get to know him, she told herself firmly.

"Do you know who this visitor is that everybody's talking about?"

"Oh, yes," he said, eyes gleaming. "None other than Lord Weatherby himself, and his manservant. Sir Baldric's widely known to be the brains of the operation, but you didn't hear that from me. Pathetic, really, the way he has to pretend to be subservient to that daffy English fool..."

Nasty words notwithstanding, Audra couldn't help but gasp. "Lord Weatherby! As in Weatherby Manor?"

"The very same. You've a fondness for the place?"

"I mean, it's what brought me to Scotland," she said, shrugging. "At least, a restored version of it was. Though there weren't any Weatherbys living there anymore."

"Good," Brian said, a dark look on his face. "I'd best be going, Audra. I've got a few things to do before Lord Weatherby gets here. Making sure he's welcomed according to his stature." He winked at her, and then he was gone, leaving her frowning over her breakfast. It seemed strange that he didn't want to at least finish the meal with her. And he'd promised yesterday that they'd talk more about Annie — but

it hadn't even seemed to occur to him. What had gotten into him? Did he really bear that much of a grudge against Lord Weatherby?

It must have been the Scotland versus England thing, she thought as she finished her breakfast by herself, gazing thoughtfully at the wall. She was hardly the most politically well-educated person, but she understood that a long and complicated colonial history stood between the two countries... and that the peace that currently stood between the Scottish and the English was rather fragile. Did Brian have some personal resentment against the English? she wondered. Was that why he was so determined to... what? Make Lord Weatherby feel unwelcome?

At any rate, she was curious to catch a glimpse of the English Lord... so when the visitors arrived, she made sure to be among the throng in the entrance hall waiting to greet him — after first making sure it was alright with Fiona. After all, she'd been warned to lay low... and Fiona had frowned a little, then shrugged her shoulders.

"Lord Weatherby knows a little about what goes on," she said with a shrug. "He's certainly had his share of encounters with us time-travelers. He's a bit of a pompous ass, and my first meeting with him... well, let's just say don't find yourself alone with him, alright? Don't say anything too explicit about being from the future, but... well, I don't see the harm in making an introduction. He'll find out eventually about you being here, he always does. Might as well introduce you."

Audra grinned. She was rather looking forward to meeting the man who'd given his name to the manor that had brought her here.

To her surprise, Scarlet and Brianna were among those waiting

to meet with Lord Weatherby. She hadn't spent much time with either woman — she certainly felt a lot closer to Fiona, Marianne, Helena, and Delilah after the evening they'd spent together the night before, an experience she was still having trouble reconciling as a real memory and not a dream. Still, she had grass stains on her feet and a pleasant ache in her muscles to confirm that she hadn't dreamed the whole thing. But as they stood in the entrance hall waiting for Lord Weatherby and his servant to be received outside, she sidled up to Brianna, who gave her a quick smile as she explained her own particular history with Lord Weatherby.

It was an exciting tale. On her arrival in medieval Scotland, she'd been effectively roped in as a hostage negotiator to deal with some rather serious problems involving a nearby clan who'd been left destitute by a bad harvest. They'd made trouble on the roads in the area for weeks before finally making a move to take Lord Weatherby hostage in order to have their demands met — and it had been Brianna who had found a solution for everyone involved, all while avoiding bloodshed and falling for her now-husband, of course, which was a side effect that made the woman smile softly when she recounted it.

"And Scarlet's even closer, of course," Brianna said with a shrug, gesturing to the platinum-blond woman, who was grinning at her side.

"I'm basically one of the family," she said casually. "Or at least, my ancestor was. She was a cousin of Lord Weatherby, went running off with some Scottish hooligan... all very scandalous, of course. So, I married him."

She shook her head, amused by this common thread in all the women's stories — high adventure and excitement, then a marriage. "There's a lot of that going around, huh?"

"Fate," Scarlet said, rolling her eyes. "Never did believe in it, but ... well, I can't say I'd change anything about it, as gross as it is. He's pretty good." The soft smile on her face belied her casual words, and Brianna turned a thoughtful eye to Audra.

"What about you?"

"What about me?" She could already feel herself blushing. "Haven't fielded any proposals lately, if that's what you're asking..."

"You've been spending a lot of time with Brian and Duncan," Scarlet said slyly. "And they were the ones who found you out there... do you think love might be in the cards?"

She wrinkled her nose. Yes, she felt rather drawn to Brian, it was true... but after their conversation that morning, she wasn't sure how deep that crush really went. "They're good-looking," she admitted, making Scarlet cackle knowingly. "But I mean... I don't know. I don't know if we're — you know, compatible."

"You don't have to rush into anything," Brianna said firmly. "There's no rule that says you have to marry a MacClaran."

"No, just a lot of precedent." Scarlet chuckled, earning a reproving stare from Brianna.

Thankfully, the conversation was ended by the arrival into the entrance hall of — was that really Lord Weatherby? Audra stared at him, rather taken aback by how... well, unimpressive he was. There had been an enormous portrait of the man, lovingly restored, that hung in pride of place in the restored Weatherby Manor where she'd been intending to work. But that portrait had made him look... well, a lot taller than he was, for a start. And a fair bit more handsome. The man who stood imperiously in the hall, peering around it as though searching for faults, had pale skin, waxy dark hair and a pair of hard green eyes that were set a little closer together than the portrait had suggested. Standing at his side was a taller, broader man who held himself like a soldier.

"That's Sir Baldric," Brianna murmured to Audra. "He keeps Weatherby in line and off our backs usually, though you didn't hear it from me."

"Ten times as smart as Lord Weatherby. He's the guy to talk to if you ever need anything from the English." Scarlet chuckled. "He's technically Weatherby's manservant, but everyone knows who's really in charge."

Lord Weatherby eventually approached the three of them, a thin-lipped smile on his face. Audra fought to keep her face blank as the strong scent of perfume hit her — it seemed Lord Weatherby had a fondness for scented oils, and the impression was an overwhelming one. He greeted Brianna and Scarlet with a stiffly formal attitude. Audra didn't miss the way Baldric, while bowing deeply, tipped both

of them a cheeky wink before Weatherby turned his hard green eyes to Audra, who offered her best attempt at a curtsy.

"Another one?" Weatherby said with exasperation. "You're not serious."

"Lord Weatherby, may I introduce Audra Kendall? Audra's staying with us for a time," Brianna said.

Audra fought the urge to smile at the layered subtext in the words. Yes, she was saying, another time traveler. What of it? Baldric's eyes were glinting with amusement as he offered Audra a bow.

"It's a pleasure to meet you, Lord Weatherby," Audra said shyly, not quite sure of her role in all this pomp and ceremony but wanting to make a good impression regardless.

"You're rather young," Lord Weatherby said, raising an eyebrow. "Younger than the rest of them."

Audra blinked, unsure of how to reply to that.

"I hope you're enjoying your time in Scotland," Sir Baldric said smoothly, effortlessly covering the awkwardness of Weatherby's rather blunt comment.

Audra was already beginning to see what the other women had meant by Baldric being the smarter of the two.

"You've chosen a beautiful time to visit. How long might you be staying?" A knowing glint in his eye.

She realized with an odd lurch of her heart that he knew that the answer was 'forever'.

"At least as long as the weather stays this pleasant," Brianna cut in with a stiff little grin. "I trust it was a pleasant ride up?"

"I'd have much preferred to spend it in my garden, but when one wants an audience with the Laird one must drag oneself halfway across the country, it seems," Lord Weatherby said, sounding peeved.

"You do have a beautiful home," Audra said, unable to resist — but she realized even as she spoke that she'd made an error.

This was her first time meeting Lord Weatherby — how on earth would she have knowledge of what his home was like? She felt panic surging in her chest, could feel the stiffening of the women to her left and right — but as if by magic, Sir Baldric was there before the look of surprise in Lord Weatherby's eyes could turn to suspicion.

"Of course — you were present at the gathering Lord Weatherby held last week, hm?"

"That's right," Audra said, a little too quickly.

Lord Weatherby's eyes were narrowed. "I don't recall having the pleasure."

"Remember, my lord?" Baldric said, casual as anything. "You were taken unwell early in the evening and had to retire... many of your guests had to content themselves with the pleasure of one another's

company."

A flash of embarrassment crossed Weatherby's face. Audra found herself wondering whether Lord Weatherby had in fact taken unwell — or whether it had had something more to do with the wine served at the party. At any rate, he seemed satisfied with this explanation for her little slip-up, and she lingered a little while longer to exchange pleasantries before Lord Weatherby and Sir Baldric were called into the dining hall to share a meal with the Laird and his higher-ranked advisors. Breathing a sigh of relief, Audra slipped out of the door and into the sunlight of the late morning, fiercely grateful that she'd gotten through the conversation unscathed.

Still, she found herself at something of a loose end. The whole castle seemed preoccupied with Lord Weatherby's visit, a curious mixture of resentment and worry in the faces of the servants and other folk she encountered, and she wandered the grounds feeling a little lost for something to do. She'd hoped to find Brian, to spend a little time with him alone while his brother was otherwise occupied... but he was nowhere to be found, and at any rate, her breakfast with him that morning had left rather a sour taste in her mouth. Had she been wrong about him? she wondered. Duncan was such a disagreeable sort — it was possible she'd only liked Brian because by contrast he was less aggravating. Maybe she was going to be the first time-traveling woman in the history of the Keep who didn't end up married to a MacClaran man. It was possible, right? Nobody was exactly trying to frog march her down the aisle, were they?

Lost in these thoughts, she frowned a little at the sound of raised voices, distracting her — and then her eyes widened at the sight of a couple of loose horses bolting through the courtyard with the whites of their eyes showing. They were a good distance from her, not close enough to threaten her safety, and she watched in surprise as a handful of grooms chased them down, swearing at each other. The horses took some catching, and she was able to hear enough of the grooms' irritable conversation to gauge that these were Lord Weatherby's horses, escaped somehow from the stables.

Audra headed inside after that, planning to spend some time in her room reading. But it seemed that the misadventures of the day weren't restricted to the stables. Climbing the stairs, she overheard a gaggle of servants deep in animated conversation that was full of recrimination and pointed stares. She gathered as she lingered to shamelessly eavesdrop that something had gone wrong with the beer that had been served to the Laird and his guests — somehow, it had been full of sawdust. And that wasn't all. Several bottles of wine — good wine, too, the wine that was reserved for guests — had been fouled somehow with vinegar and served to Lord Weatherby and Sir Baldric



before the mistake had been caught.

The servants seemed at a loss to explain it, and Audra frowned to herself as she headed up the stairs. The kitchens were run like a military operation here at the Keep — they needed to be, with all the hungry guards and castle folk who were fed every day. It seemed strange that such a silly mistake had been made on Mary's watch. Embarrassing, too, given how determined the people of the Keep seemed to be to impress Lord Weatherby — not exactly because they wanted his favor, but because they seemed determined to prove that they were better than him... it was strange, and she felt troubled as she spent the rest of the morning absorbed in the book of folklore that she'd borrowed. There was a chapter about pixies and the troublesome pranks they played, and she found herself wondering — not without cause — whether the castle might be beset with ill-intentioned faeries...

Her stomach growling, she headed down for lunch a few hours later, smiling to herself at the realization that her body and appetite were already settling into the rhythms of the castle. But as she reached the entrance hall, she blinked with surprise to see Duncan stepping through the door to the castle, dressed for riding with a satchel across his back. He'd returned earlier than she'd expected from his errand, and she gritted her teeth a little, not looking forward to dealing with him.

But when he saw her, his face lit up with a smile that sent warmth fluttering through her chest — and she frowned, a little confused as she approached.

"Duncan?"

But the man before her threw back his head and laughed. "Maybe we should style our hair differently, just to make the game a little more fair," he said, his bright blue eyes twinkling. Her eyes widened. This was Brian — which meant that it had been Duncan who'd been at the Keep all day.

Then why had he misled her — and everyone else in the Keep, for that matter — into believing that he was his brother?

Brian looked a little confused at her blank staring, tilting his head a little in curiosity as she tried to gather her wits. The strongest thing she felt, to her surprise, was relief — relief that the rather unpleasant breakfast she'd had with Brian had actually been with his brother. She was annoyed a little, too. He'd lied to her, deliberately misled her — she didn't like being tricked like that. Gritting her teeth, she privately resolved to spend a bit more time studying the two of them to make sure she had a failsafe way of telling them apart. She didn't like how stupid she felt right now, as though the wool had been pulled over her eyes... and a look of recognition was dawning on Brian's face as he looked at her.

"Duncan up to his old tricks again, I expect?" he said, shaking his head. "He always did love pretending to trade places with me."

She bit her lip, half considering agreeing on a password with him that would ensure she could always tell that it was Brian she was talking to and not Duncan... but before she could suggest any such thing, the doors of the dining hall slammed open, and Lord Weatherby and Baldrick came through. The look on Weatherby's face was unpleasant in the extreme, and even Sir Baldrick's jaw was tight as he followed his Lord. It seemed their audience with the Laird hadn't gone very well, and Audra found herself wondering whether it had something to do with the sawdust in the beer and the vinegar in the wine...

"Lord Weatherby!" Brian looked delighted to see the man, and he hastened forward to greet him — but the look Weatherby leveled at him was poisonous.

"I've had quite enough of your so-called jokes for the day, Brian," he said coolly.

Brian stared at him blankly as he swept past him and down the stairs. The Laird and Fiona followed him out, and Audra could see drawn expressions on their faces — it seemed they hadn't had an

especially pleasant lunch, either. What on earth had gone wrong? Brian was staring after them, clearly at a loss — but it was too late to go after them. He turned back to Audra, a worried look on his face.

"I suppose they mixed me and Duncan up," he said lightly, and she could see him trying not to look frustrated. "He does have a sense of humor that's... well, an acquired taste."

Audra would have put it somewhat less politely than that, of course, but Brian looked tired and a little defeated by the encounter with Lord Weatherby, and she decided wisely not to kick him while he was down by insulting his brother. Still, she wanted to talk to him about what had happened that morning. Mixing the two of them up was one thing — something she was working on — but if Duncan was going to get into the habit of deliberately misleading her about who he was, or if Brian was going to get involved with that kind of game... well, she wanted to put a stop to it as early as possible. It was no fun at all.

They headed into the dining hall together — Brian was hungry after a long ride and a busy morning, and Audra wanted to get some time alone with him — the real him, not his brother. As they settled down together, she couldn't stop herself from scanning the hall, just waiting for him to appear out of nowhere as he had the other day when she'd wanted to spend some time just with Brian. But he was nowhere to be seen. Brian filled her in about how he'd spent his morning — it turned out Duncan hadn't been lying about the need to pack up their camp out on the moors.

"How long did you stay there?" she asked, fascinated despite herself.

Brian shrugged his shoulders. "A few weeks. We were..." He sighed. "I was a little reluctant to come home if I'm honest. We didn't leave on the best of terms. Duncan and his pranks... and, well, with the two of us looking so similar..."

"You didn't play any pranks yourself?"

Brian shrugged again. "I don't find them that amusing, if I'm honest."

But something had occurred to her — something that sent a sudden jolt of suspicion running down her spine, something that clearly caught Brian's attention, too. "These pranks you said he pulled... what kinds of pranks? Letting horses out, messing with food and drink, that kind of thing?"

Brian chuckled. "Aye, the stablehands truly did despise us."

Us, she thought remotely — even though he'd just said that he didn't involve himself in the pranks. Strange, how willing he was to consistently take part of the blame for his brother's misbehavior. But she had another topic on her mind.

"This morning, Lord Weatherby visiting and everything... it seemed to go pretty poorly," she said. "His horses got out and were running around in the courtyard, apparently all the beer and wine that was served was fouled up with sawdust and vinegar..."

Brian was frowning. "That does sound like Duncan. But he wouldn't be foolish enough to —" He took a deep breath, a complex mix of emotions flickering across his face. "Maybe he would."

"I think so," she said grimly. "Maybe you should ask him... because from what I can tell, you've gotten the lion's share of the blame. He told me — told everyone, as far as I can tell — that it was him who went on the errand, and that it was you who was here at the Keep all morning, playing all those silly pranks."

Brian sighed, pushing away his empty plate. "It won't be the first time I'll have had to make apologies for pranks I had no hand in," he said simply, shrugging his broad shoulders. "You said that Weatherby's horses got out? I'd best apologize to the stablehands. I thought they were a little surly when they took my horse from me."

"I'll come with you," Audra offered. As bad as she felt for Brian being the victim of the situation, she had to admit that she was feeling a considerable amount of relief. The crush she was nursing on him had taken quite a hit that morning, when she'd been talking to Duncan under the assumption that she was talking to Brian... knowing that those changes to her feelings weren't based in reality was reassuring, and she could feel her feelings for him returning. He seemed happy enough to let her come along with him to the stables after lunch, too. He made a solemn apology to the stablehands for all the trouble that had been caused, even offering to put in a few hours of grunt work in the stables as a way of making up for their trouble — an offer that clearly went some way to mending hurt feelings.

He wouldn't hear of Audra helping him, though, despite her offer, so she lingered by the stalls, keeping him company as he worked. It wasn't exactly the most romantic setting, shoveling horse manure... but she'd always liked the smell of hay and horses, and the opportunity to be alone with Brian for once was thrilling. Still, Duncan's conduct that morning was troubling her. They'd made a quick lap of the dining hall before they'd headed out to the stables, searching for Duncan, but nobody they spoke to had seen hide nor hair of either brother since earlier that morning.

"He did mention he'd met a girl in the village," Brian said with a shrug when she raised the subject of discussing the morning's tomfoolery with Duncan. "He may be away for the evening."

"That's convenient," Audra said under her breath. Still, she couldn't help but feel a little grateful that Duncan was staying away. He'd need to answer for his wrongdoing eventually, of course, but she

appreciated the opportunity to spend some time with Brian without his irritating twin brother acting as third wheel...

It was a very pleasant day, all things considered, despite the sour mood that the Laird and Fiona were in that evening, and the ongoing mood of disgruntlement and resentment among the servants, who had borne the brunt of the resentment over the pranks. Brian did his best to explain that he hadn't been the one who'd been at the Keep that morning, but it seemed that Duncan had done enough name-switching in his time that the majority of folks remained suspicious... including, to Brian's dismay, the Laird, who was very terse and cool when the mistake was explained to him.

And Duncan, of course, was nowhere to be seen. He didn't return from the village that evening — wasn't seen at all, in fact, until the following day, when Audra headed into the dining hall for lunch and was confronted with both twins sitting together, deep in conversation over lunch. For a moment, she considered tracking down Marianne, Helena, or Delilah to dine with, Fiona was too busy so she didn't think she'd be available — either way, she didn't much fancy dealing with Duncan right now — but the two of them had seen her, and were giving her identical friendly smiles as they beckoned for her to join them. Gritting her teeth, she headed over to their table and settled down opposite the two of them. She'd learned by now that it wasn't a good idea to sit too close to Duncan. Not that he'd ever done anything especially unpleasant, but there was something about the way his eyes glinted when he looked at her that she didn't like one bit.

"Welcome back, Duncan," she said drily, raising an eyebrow. He looked a little the worse for wear, which was how she could tell the difference between them — Brian, by contrast, had had a good night of sleep. Duncan looked like he'd been up most of the night carousing. "You certainly had me going yesterday."

"Oh, you believed me?" A fairly believable expression of dismay crossed his face... followed by a grin and a shake of his head. "I'm truly sorry, Audra. I'd assumed you were better at telling the difference between us now... I thought we were both joking."

That wasn't true, Audra thought numbly, feeling hot rage surge through her. There had been nothing jokey about the way he'd told her he was Brian — he'd misled her deliberately, she was sure of it. But he and Brian were laughing together, and she sat in frozen silence, aware that she'd missed her chance to object.

And to her irritation, it seemed Duncan was going to get away scot-free with all his pranks from the day before. Brian had raised the subject — and Duncan, somehow, had made the argument that he hadn't done anything at all. Sometimes, things just went wrong, he claimed... servants were lazy, bottles got mixed up, and horses

sometimes just broke loose. He even managed to suggest that maybe it was Lord Weatherby or Baldric themselves who were responsible for the pranks, for the series of events that had gone so wrong... trying to discredit or embarrass the MacClarans in petty vengeance for their long, tense history.

At any rate, the subject didn't seem to be up for discussion. The way Duncan manipulated conversations, it was hard to pin him down for any length of time — before she knew it, he was carrying on about the night he'd had the previous evening, the carousing and celebrating he'd done down in the village, drinking to his and his brother's triumphant return to the Keep. But the lunch left a sour taste in Audra's mouth. They might be delighted to be back, Duncan in particular... but she had a feeling that if things kept up at this rate, their stay might not be as long as they hoped.

**I**t was several days before she got any more time to herself with

Brian. She busied herself in other ways, reading, mostly, or pottering around the castle getting familiar with how things worked, offering tentative help here and there to make herself feel like she was doing something useful. Something told her that it was important to take her time settling in. There was a small part of her mind that was still holding onto hope that all of this was a bizarre dream that she'd wake up from, maybe in the tiny bed she'd been assigned back in the future at Weatherby Manor... or even earlier than that. Maybe the whole trip had been a dream, and she'd wake up in her parents' house, ready for another bland day of doing exactly what she was told...

Funny. When she'd first arrived here, that thought had been something she'd longed for. Now... well, now it sounded awful. She realized she was enjoying her time here — that she was actually having a good time in medieval Scotland, beginning to settle in, beginning to see a future here. It helped, of course, that she had good friends — she spent plenty of time with the other time-travelers, trading information about the present for information about the future. She missed it, still — missed home, missed her family, missed hot showers. But there was plenty of joy to be found in this strange place and time, too. And besides, her negative side whispered... it wasn't like she had much of a choice.

She spent more time talking about the specifics of the magic that had brought her here, too, with the coven to which she seemed to have been admitted as a member. It was thrilling, knowing that her clandestine study of Pagan ways had gotten her into such an exciting new place, but her coven-mates cautioned her to go slowly, and to be very careful about how enthusiastically she engaged with the study of magic and witchcraft. Even a knowledge of herbs could arouse suspicion in the wrong context, even though Audrina had a whole room at the top of the Keep she dedicated to them, she and Cora were

definitely the ones to go to where herbs were concerned. They did tend to treat ailments around the Keep as well as the village, but the people of the village could be fickle... she'd been told quite firmly that it would be best not to spend much time in the village if she could avoid it. There'd been too much strange activity lately from the time-traveling women of the Keep, what with Fiona making changes to the village with her rain catchment system, and Karin stopping a plague, as well as numerous other activities. It had been decided that they need to keep as much strangeness as they could from the actual village, because the villagers tended to be suspicious of anything 'new' and 'unusual'.

But she did get some time with Brian, here and there. The more she thought about it — and consulted with the other women, who were more familiar with the ways of the locals — the more she suspected that he was courting her. They went for walks together and to her relief, he seemed to have picked up on her dislike for Duncan, who always seemed clingy and oppressive when he accompanied them.

They talked on one walk when they were alone together about the curse — about what she'd learned about it all since the first time they'd discussed it. It was a pleasant afternoon, gray and a little rainy, but the sky had cleared just enough to risk a walk around the castle together, arm in arm. Duncan, it seemed, was off in the village for a few days. He'd been heard bragging all around the castle about the woman he was seeing down there, a beautiful young girl with long dark hair who, he'd been heard to say more than a few times, looked just like Audra. That had needled her, for some reason — it seemed such a needlessly specific detail to include, that he was sleeping with a girl who looked like her. But at least it meant he was out of their hair.

"It makes sense," he admitted thoughtfully as they sat for a moment, gazing down over the hill toward the village. "The curse, I mean. I'll admit I've always felt a little cursed."

"You have?" She raised an eyebrow, curious about this. The curse itself had been laid on the MacClarans when he'd been a child — but Brian didn't seem to be speaking about that particularly. There was a heavy expression on his face when he shook his head.

"Aye, ever since we were young. People don't seem to... to take to me. I do my best to be kind and patient and virtuous, to work hard and do my part and all the rest of it... but it feels as though Duncan and I are quickly driven away from any home we make. It's starting to happen now, even," he said, shaking his head. "You've seen how the servants treat me."

She bit her lip. It was true — Brian was far from the most popular resident of the Keep these days. The women tended to gather in



clusters when they saw him or his brother approaching, mingled looks of disgust and fear on their faces. But Audra couldn't help but wonder how much that might have to do with the actions of his brother... the women of the Keep were hardly shrinking violets who feared the presence of just any man. If they bore such hostility, there was likely to be a reason for it. Unfortunately, she couldn't get much insight. It seemed that word had spread that Brian was courting her, and she received looks of similar suspicion — though instead of hostility, the overriding note was one of pity. It always troubled her, but what could she do about it?

"The Keep is your home," she said softly. "You're a MacClaran. And so is your brother," she added grudgingly, wanting to be polite but not much wanting to speak his name. "I think it's his pranks that have gotten you off on the wrong foot. You should really talk to him."

"Aye, I've tried," he said with a shrug. "Annie always disliked his sense of humor, too." A shadow crossed his face. "Before she died, of course."

She reached out to touch his arm in a gesture of wordless comfort, and he smiled back at her, his eyes troubled.

"I've been thinking about her a lot lately."

"I can imagine," she said softly, feeling a twinge of guilt shoot through her. Looking just like his wife as she did, she worried that spending time with her was painful for him. But he shook his head.

"No, not because of that," he said. "Because of what you've been telling me — about the curse, and all that. The role magic played in losing her."

She stilled. That hadn't occurred to her. "What do you mean?"

"Her suicide always baffled me," he said softly. "I mean... she'd been a little quiet, a little distant in the month leading up to it, but aside from that, she was her usual self. There were no signs that she was in such despair that she might end her own life, nothing I could have done to help her... and we were so close. I couldn't understand why she wouldn't have spoken to me about what she was going through, wouldn't have come to me before she took such a drastic step to end her own unhappiness..."

Audra felt like she was holding her breath. Brian had never opened up to her like this before, never spoken so honestly... there was a raw edge to his voice, emotion in it like she'd never heard before. Well — that wasn't strictly correct. He always sounded sad when he talked about Annie... but usually when he brought her up, Duncan was there to change the subject, to cut him off and tell him to stop talking about her so much. Why was that? she wondered, frowning a little. Had Duncan really been so jealous of his brother's wife that he didn't want her being spoken of, even in death? He did seem so clingy and

possessive when it came to his brother's attention... maybe he'd resented Annie for taking so much of it away from him.

"The curse," she said now, nodding. "You think it might have had something to do with her death?"

"It's the only thing that makes sense," he said softly. "Knowing that there was a supernatural force behind her falling from that cliffside... I mean, maybe it wasn't a suicide at all. Maybe she simply fell. We discounted that idea because she was always so sure-footed on the cliffs... but if a curse was afoot..."

Audra smiled, reaching over to squeeze his hand. "I'm glad you've been able to find some peace."

"Aye, that's one thing that's come out of all of this," he said with a smile. "Even if Laird Donal does lose his temper and sends us away again..."

"Don't joke about that," she said firmly, squeezing his hand. "I don't want you leaving the Keep. Not when we're just getting to know each other."

He smiled back at her, those bright blue eyes shining. God, he was good-looking. It was a miracle she could even speak around him half the time. They sat together in pleasant silence for a while longer, and she couldn't help but feel a shiver of disappointment when they finally turned and headed back for the Keep. He was every bit the perfect gentleman, never so much as touching her hand in a way that made her feel that her boundaries were being encroached upon... but part of her was beginning to think that he was never going to make any kind of move. She'd be thirty before they so much as kissed each other... that was unless she took matters into her own hands.

And that prospect thrilled and terrified her in equal parts. If she was honest — and she hadn't let on about this particular detail to any of her friends here, let alone Brian himself — she'd never so much as held a man's hand before she reached this place. Her parents were far too protective to have let her explore or experiment, even innocently, with boys... and the small town she'd grown up in meant that her parents had enough of a reputation that most boys steered clear of her in the first place. It was nice, she'd decided, holding hands. She was interested in trying out all the rest. But she had no idea how to go about it. She'd seen plenty of movies and TV shows, of course... but those weren't real, were they? And besides, watching people kiss was very different to actually doing it yourself. There seemed to be such an extraordinary gulf between her and Brian all the time — how did people ever manage to close that gap enough to kiss each other?

She was lost in these rather pleasant frustrations as they headed back through the gates to the Keep, the late afternoon light casting the whole courtyard with a pleasant, ruddy tinge. Brian glanced down at

her, that slight smile dancing around his lips that he so often wore when he thought she couldn't see him looking at her. It was exhilarating, knowing about that smile, knowing that he was drawn to her, that he liked her, that they were spending time together because he wanted to... well, of course things were complicated by the fact that he'd been married to a woman who was her exact double, but she could handle that. After all, weren't things with him complicated a little by the existence of his troublesome twin brother?

What had her mother always said? Speak of the devil and he shall appear... she fought the urge to groan as she saw Duncan heading across the courtyard toward them, walking fast, as though he had something important to tell them. He never did, of course... he only liked interrupting them when he sensed they were having a nice time together. Amazing, his unerring instinct for that. He grabbed his brother around the neck and the two began to play-wrestle, and Audra, feeling her irritation rise, said a short goodbye, and headed into the Keep alone.

One of these days, she'd get enough time alone with Brian to kiss him. And hopefully, that would be before she died of old age.

**A**t dinner that night, she sat with the women from the coven, well, except for Fiona. It was an unofficial little grouping that she'd learned they did often, sharing quite a few of their meals together. Sometimes Fiona joined them, sometimes she was busy with Lady of the Manor business and couldn't. It was a non-exclusive meeting, of course, and other less magically-inclined time travelers often joined them... but Audra always secretly enjoyed it when it was just them. They'd speak in low voices about magic, and the conversation was rarely pulled in more mundane directions. That evening, though, she found it difficult to feel too enthusiastic about anything. She was still annoyed about Duncan interrupting her and Brian that afternoon. In the time since, she'd reflected that without his intervention, Brian might have walked her up to her room, as he was often in the habit of doing... and she might just have been brave enough to initiate a kiss. Not that she hadn't had the opportunity earlier — part of this was her fault for procrastinating — but still...

"Are you feeling alright, Audra?"

Trust Marianne to spot her ill mood from a mile away. The woman always was so insightful — was it the benefit of her age and wisdom or was it the magical inclinations? Audra wondered. Probably a mix of the two.

"I'm fine," she said, debating whether to share her frustrations with the women. She didn't want to be heard speaking ill of Brian's brother, but it was getting difficult to tolerate Duncan even in passing, and the idea of venting about it was very tempting. "Went for a walk with Brian this evening."

"Oh?" Delilah leaned forward, her eyes bright — but Helena, sitting beside her, tightened her lips a little, and Audra felt a spark of curiosity at that. "Have you chosen a brother yet?"

"Chosen a —" Audra fought the urge to laugh. "Right. Of course. I am, after all, magically affianced to one of them, right?"

Marianne shook her head, eyes dancing. "As we've said. Just because there's a trend, doesn't mean you have to follow it."

"I know." Audra gave her a quick smile. It was good to know that she didn't have an army of women breathing down her neck waiting for her to fall in love with a MacClaran... but at the same time, she was pretty firmly interested in one, wasn't she? And it was nice to have an army of women to give her advice who'd been through similar situations. "But I do like Brian. And he likes me," she added, fighting the urge to blush a little. It felt vain and self-aggrandizing to say that out loud — but the women only nodded as though she'd pointed out a very straightforward fact.

"Of course he does. Who wouldn't?"

"Did it go alright? Did he say something?" Helena was frowning still, and Audra felt her curiosity stir again.

"It was fine. He's good company. We talked about magic, talked about the curse and everything, his wife..."

Marianne nodded. She'd offered a fair bit of counsel to them both over the last few days, discussing the precise nature of the curse, the way it could have contributed to the hapless Annie's tragic death. "It can be tough, knowing you're the spitting image of someone they were so close with..."

"That doesn't bother me," Audra said with a shrug. "He's aware I'm not her, you know? I just..." She took a deep breath. "It's Duncan."

There it was — a spark of anger in Helena's face. "What did he do?" she asked immediately, leaning forward.

Audra tilted her head. "Nothing, really, it's just..." She sighed. "I'm probably being unfair to him. But he's kind of... aggravating. He's always interrupting us, always following us around — the way he teases Brian is annoying. He spends half his time trying to make it clear that he's better than Brian at everything, and the other half reminding him that I'm not Annie. Like — he knows. It's fine." She raised an eyebrow. "I get the feeling that you don't like him, Helena."

Helena looked surprised. "Good eye."

"Has he — done something?" Audra frowned. "I know he's been a bit — forward, with women in the village and whatnot —"

"God, has he." Helena rolled her eyes. "I overheard him trying to bully some poor servant girl into kissing him the other day. I almost clocked him across the face, I swear."

Audra couldn't help but giggle at that. Helena was a tall, slender woman who didn't look particularly threatening... but looks could be deceiving. Audra wouldn't be on the bad side of a witch for love nor money. "And —" She hesitated. "Here's the thing. I was worried about it because I knew you were spending time with Brian, and — well, that was the name he kept giving her. Kept repeating that he was

Brian MacClaran and she wouldn't ever do any better than him — really unpleasant stuff. If I hadn't known Brian was with you, Audra, I'd have believed him. They really do look identical."

"I know," Audra said, shaking her head. "I wish I had a permanent marker or something so that I could put a discrete little mark on one of them..."

"It's not a kind game," Marianne said with a frown. "It's misleading and unpleasant at the best of times, not knowing who you're talking to. I wish the pair of them would stop."

Audra bit her lip. "That's the thing. Brian doesn't play along. Every time I've gotten them confused, Brian's cleared it up straight away, and Duncan's let me struggle. It's Duncan who likes pretending to be Brian — not so much the other way around."

"That you know of," Helena pointed out, not looking convinced. "I mean, he might just be playing nice with you."

"Possible," Audra agreed softly, feeling a little crestfallen. Was it possible that Brian really was manipulating her? "I'm not exactly the most — experienced, with all of this." She'd told the women about her relative lack of romantic experience. They'd all reassured her that they'd be there to protect her, to help her when she needed them. It was important that she listen to their advice — even though her gut was telling her that Brian was a good man, that she could trust him, she had to keep her wits about her. Good men could do bad things, couldn't they? Hadn't that been her parents' constant refrain? God, she'd never imagined she'd miss her parents this much.

As the days wore on, she tried to keep her faculties when she spent time with Brian — and, unfortunately, with his brother, who seemed more and more determined to keep interrupting their dates as they got closer. What was worse, his attitude worsened as time wore on — he grew curt and snide with them, his implicit little barbs turning into overt attacks here and there, though he always waved his nasty comments away as jokes whenever Brian confronted him on being unpleasant. She was getting better and better at telling the two of them apart... although honestly it continued to have less to do with their physical appearance and more to do with the way they reacted to her... and the way she reacted to them. Duncan made her skin crawl, made her body react as though she was in danger. When she saw Brian, she felt safe, felt excited to see him.

Thankfully, they were able to sneak some time in together away from Duncan... mostly because of his womanizing exploits. He was always bragging about how many of the local girls were interested in him, including by his account half a dozen down in the village, and just as many among the servants at the Keep. Some part of it was true — Audra did see him in rather intimate conversation with a young

woman by the castle wall one day worrying, for one frozen moment, that it was Brian she was looking at, but she couldn't help but suspect that he was exaggerating his accomplishments. And the fact that he kept referring to a particular girl in the village as looking like Audra, but much prettier always set her teeth on edge.

Still, if he was pursuing them, he wasn't pursuing her. Wasn't gazing at her with that unpleasant look in his eyes, wasn't making off-color jokes about her blossoming relationship with Brian, who always did his best to deflect and diffuse those comments. And one evening, when Duncan was down in the village and the two of them were alone together in an otherwise abandoned castle courtyard, she knew that this might be their only chance. Mustering more courage than she thought she'd ever exhibited in her life, she moved in closer to Brian where they were sitting together on the steps, affecting a little shiver to suggest that it was the cool night air, not his magnetic presence that was drawing her closer to him. Brian glanced down at her, and she felt lightning shoot down her spine as he lifted his arm ever so casually to place it around her shoulders.

They were alone out here. Duncan was nowhere to be seen, the closest people were either inside the Keep or up on the walls — and their attention, she could tell by their backs, was on the surrounding area, not on her and Brian, sitting on the steps. And so — hoping like hell that Brian would get the idea quickly enough to save her from embarrassing herself — she turned her face toward him and leaned in for a kiss.

The first brush of their lips was electric. She'd never so much as kissed a man on the cheek before — the sensation of the slight brush of his stubble was completely new to her as, with a little surprise clear in his movements, he turned to claim her lips more firmly. His lips were softer than she'd expected, though there was a power in the kiss that she could just about detect... and that sent a shock of something entirely new running down her back, pooling in her stomach. She had no idea how long the kiss lasted, but when Brian pulled back with a soft smile on his face, she could feel her heart pounding in her chest... and she discretely tried to catch her breath, too, realizing that she'd been holding it.

"I've wanted to do that for a very long time," he told her softly, reaching up with one hand to push a lock of hair back from her face.

She smiled, feeling a blush rising to her cheeks even as she felt utter exhilaration and triumph thunder through her veins.

"Me too," she said, feeling a sudden rush of recklessness, of confidence. "What took you so long?"

He laughed aloud at that, a beautiful sound that made her heart lurch in her chest. "Waiting for the right moment, I suppose. Some

time alone with you."

Audra nodded, smiling up at him as she reached up to kiss him again, more confident by far now that she'd covered that ground once already. What she was absolutely not going to do was sully the moment of their first kiss by making any kind of reference to the fact that it had taken so long because his irritating twin brother was always hanging around making awful comments... right now, the only dark-haired, blue-eyed MacClaran man she cared about was the one sitting beside her, his powerful arm around her shoulders and his soft lips on hers. Duncan could spend the rest of his life down in the village chasing after his girls, as far as she was concerned... right now, sitting on the steps of the Keep with this gorgeous man at her side, Audra had everything she could possibly want.



”I have an idea.”

Fiona had a habit of starting conversations like that, Audra reflected with some amusement — quickly, abruptly, as though they had already dispensed with the formalities and were halfway through discussing whatever project she had in mind. It was always a project, too. She'd been busy the last week or two making plans to rebuild one of the stone towers that stood between parts of the wall that surrounded the Keep, which had been much the worse for wear for quite some time — and of course, a few modern improvements from the clever Fiona wouldn't go astray. Funny, for a woman who'd made her career as an archeologist, Fiona had found a way to reinvent herself here in medieval Scotland by becoming an inventor along with a magic wielder. As a result, Audra hadn't spent much time with her... but still, it felt like chatting with an old friend when Fiona slipped in to sit beside her in the dining hall one morning.

“An idea?”

“You mentioned that you brought your charger as well as your phone, right?”

Audra blinked, taken aback by the question. It was true that she still had her phone — it sat on her bedside table like a mournful little monument to her old life, a kind of shrine to the connection to her family and friends that she'd lost when she'd come here... but part of her suspected that she ought to throw it away. Scarlet had told her that when she'd arrived in Scotland, she'd buried her phone — at the time, she hadn't realized that she'd traveled through time, of course, and was trying to prevent herself being tracked by GPS, but still, the idea of a funeral for her phone had a certain pleasant ring to it. But now Fiona was curious.

“Yeah, I had it in my pocket when I came through. Why, have you found somewhere I can plug it in?” she joked. But Fiona wasn't smiling. “But now that we have your phone... I bet you've got photos and stuff on there, right?”

She nodded, thinking back. “I mean, I kept a lot of stuff on the cloud, but there's definitely a fair bit in the memory too.”

"It'd be a great teaching tool," Fiona said. "As more and more of us come through, I've been thinking that we really need to start teaching the locals more about where we're from — so they stop thinking of us as witches, which some of us are, of course, but it would be nice if they could start thinking of us as people who merely have the advantage of a bit more knowledge and technology. Audrina has always been more cautious, because well, there are witch hunters and all, and I guess I should disclose that witch hunters did murder my predecessor and I'm not keen to have a repeat of that, so we'll be careful, of course," she added when Audra frowned.

"She was murdered by witch hunters?"

Fiona nodded. "Yeah, I came through about five minutes after it happened too, it wasn't pretty. We even shared the same name. Freaked Donal out, I can tell you," Fiona said with a laugh.

"I can imagine," Audra replied, picturing how that might have played out.

"Anyway, I swear we won't do anything to bring the witch hunters back to our area. I promise I'm not going to make a presentation down in the village or anything, as much as I'd like to drag them kicking and screaming into the future, even if it's just a century or two and not quite the twenty-first. But I think it'd be in our interests to teach the people we trust more about where we come from. Even if it's just our own families. What do you say?"

Audra blinked. "You need my help?"

"Sure. It's your phone, isn't it? And you're one of us," Fiona added firmly, squeezing her arm. "This affects you too."

"It's a great idea," Audra said, nodding. "I'm happy to help."

"Great." Another grin split across Fiona's pretty face as she rubbed her hands together.

Audra knew the look of a woman with a new project, and quietly smiled to herself. She hoped the stone tower had been squared away — this seemed to be Fiona's favorite project now.

"So first of all, I'll need some high-grade copper from the blacksmith in the village. The smith here is busy on another project, and besides, he doesn't have access to as many materials as the village's blacksmith. Could you ask one of your boys to pick the order up for me?"

"One of my—" She frowned, realizing Fiona was talking about Duncan and Brian. "They're not both my boys. Neither of them are my — I'm seeing Brian," she clarified, feeling a blush rising to her cheeks. It was true — ever since they'd kissed a few days ago, their courtship had felt a lot more real, a lot more solid. Was this what dating was like? She was enjoying it. "But Duncan isn't —"

"Whatever," Fiona said impatiently, flicking a hand. "Could you

send Brian, then, down to the village to get the copper wire? I'll make him a list," she added, eyes gleaming. "It'd be good if he could grab a few more things, too. God, this is going to be so great. How's the camera on your phone? Doesn't matter. We'll be able to take pictures!"

Audra grinned. Fiona's enthusiasm was infectious — and she brought up the subject with Brian later that day when she saw him. He was more than happy to pick up the supplies from the village the following day, saying that he'd been meaning to visit the village for quite some time now — he'd simply been so busy up at the Keep that it had slipped his mind. She grinned to herself, aware that she was the principle reason that he'd been so busy up here... and feeling a little guilty at the same time for distracting him from his other business.

Not guilty enough to stop distracting him, of course... but definitely a little guilty.

There was plenty to occupy herself with the following day with Brian down in the village. She waved goodbye to him at the gate early in the morning before heading inside for breakfast... where she was immediately accosted by Duncan, who was clearly making an effort to seem like his twin brother. Amused — and aware that for once she had him dead to rights on pretending to be his brother and not himself — she played along a little. Had Brian not told Duncan that he was heading into the village today? Or did Duncan just think she was stupid?

She'd expected him to invite her into the hall to have breakfast with him, which was something she wasn't willing to do — but what she didn't expect was for him to lunge unexpectedly into her space, clearly trying to seize her lips in a kiss. Horrified, she stumbled backwards, feeling her back hit the stone wall as she uttered a surprised little yelp that quickly caught the attention of a nearby group of guards who'd just come off duty. Duncan seized her by the shoulders, trying to force her to kiss him, and she wrenched her face away from him, heart pounding sickly in her chest, horrified by how quickly this situation had escalated — and then he was gone, and she could hear the guards shouting at him, three men with their hands on the hilts of their swords.

"Brian MacClaran," one of them growled, his eyes narrowed. "You've been warned before about taking liberties with —"

"That's Duncan," Audra said quickly, horrified not only by what had just happened or nearly happened but at the prospect that the guards might blame Brian for something that had happened when he wasn't even at the Keep let alone the fact that a similar advance from Brian wouldn't have been rejected... but that was beside the point. "That's Duncan, not Brian —"

But the guards didn't seem to care much. "Whichever one you are,"

the first one grunted, giving Duncan a meaningful look. "You're on thin ice with the Laird and with us. Watch yourself."

A chill ran down her spine as the guards sulked away. Duncan shot her a look that was so full of poisonous malice that it made her feel faint — but she lifted her chin, trying not to let him see that he'd intimidated her.

"Lord, I thought you could take a joke, Annie," Duncan said with a roll of his eyes.

She could see him trying to play it off like a joke, see him summoning the effort he needed to hide his anger at having been denied what he'd wanted. God, she hated it when he called her Annie. He never did it when Brian was around — only when he was alone with her, which was something she did her best to avoid.

She turned on her heel and swept into the dining hall, wanting absolutely nothing further to do with him for the moment. Thankfully, he didn't follow her, and she was able to find a seat with her coven, who could clearly tell something was wrong — but didn't press the issue, something for which she was grateful. She didn't really want to talk through what had just happened, not right now. But she was sure as hell going to bring it up with Brian. She could hear her parents' voices in her head clear as day, warning her about men, about what they were like, what they wanted, how to tell that they were interested in you... and she realized with a sick lurch that all their warnings had been right, at least when it came to men like Duncan MacClaran.

He was awful... and it was clear that he had some sick interest in her. Was it just an extension of his jealousy of his brother? she wondered. She and Brian had been getting along so well... maybe Duncan was jealous of that. He'd tried to interfere by crashing all their dates, trying to make the atmosphere unpleasant... and now that it hadn't worked, he was escalating his behavior. Had that been why he'd tried to kiss her? They'd been something else on his face, too, though — something possessive, and demanding, and ugly, something that told her that he felt like he was entitled to female attention wherever he wanted it. She'd seen it in his body language when he talked to the women of the Keep, heard about it from the other women who lived here...

She took a deep breath, trying to steady her nerves. She had to talk about this with Brian. So far, she'd avoided complaining too much about his brother, knowing how close the two of them were... she didn't want to alienate him by insulting his family. But Duncan had gone too far this morning, trying to kiss her like that. Brian needed to know... and she fought the worry that settled in her chest, the fear that he might blame her, somehow, for what had happened. He

always defended his brother, always had such a soft spot for him... she didn't want to put him in a position where he felt like he had to choose between her and Duncan. But at the same time, she couldn't keep silent about what had happened.

God, how had Brian ever managed to get married? Duncan must have gotten worse since Brian had met Annie, right? She couldn't imagine him letting his brother get close enough to a woman to marry her... and something about that prickled at her, something deep in her gut responding viscerally to that thought. Annie had been very unhappy in the last few weeks of her life; that was what Brian had said, though she hadn't talked to Brian about what it was. Was it possible that Duncan had had something to do with her unhappiness?

No, she told herself firmly. There was no sense in going into conjecture like that. She had to focus on the here and now, on her own experiences, not Annie's. She had to talk to Brian about how unsafe she felt around his twin brother. Maybe he'd have a word with Duncan, and everything would be fine. She had to think positive, had to try to manifest a good outcome.

But that sick dread lingered in her stomach all day, for all the world as though it had been put there by some external force. She couldn't help but think of the dreams she still had occasionally, the dreams of staring out over a stormy sea, with such an abject despair in her belly she could hardly stand it... and she hoped, very much, that the suspicions that her instincts had provided her with were false.

Because if they were true... what the hell was she going to do about it?

Brian arrived back at the Keep later that evening, just before

dinner, and Audra was grateful for the distraction from her own brooding thoughts, which she'd been unsuccessfully trying to dismiss all day. She met him in the entrance hall — Fiona was beside her, clearly excited about the equipment that Brian had promised to bring for her, and her eyes shone with delight as he pulled a heavy satchel from his shoulders and offered it to her.

"This is excellent, Brian," she said brightly, her eyes shining as she peered down into the bag. But a slight frown creased her brow. "Is this the full amount?"

"Half, I'm afraid," Brian said, a tautness to his voice that made Audra frown. "The cost was higher than anticipated."

"Higher than —" Fiona frowned, but there was something about the look on his face that made her simply shrug her shoulders. "Well, it's enough to get started with, at any rate. My thanks again for running that errand." She gave them a little wave, then turned on her heel and hastened away.

Audra watched her go, fighting the urge to laugh. If Laird Donal didn't get onto her, she was likely not to eat, sleep or drink until she'd satisfied herself with this particular project... Fiona tended to have a one-track mind when she got excited about things.

But Fiona wasn't the person she was most concerned about right now. No, that prize went squarely to Brian, who looked so harried and stressed that she almost didn't want to bring up his brother's bad behavior that day. She slipped her hand into his and gave it a squeeze, but when he smiled down at her he looked distracted, and she felt a frown cross her face. Still, a meal had never hurt — she tugged him firmly into the dining hall, ignoring his protests that he needed to clean up before dinner. They sat down together at a table — sure enough, he began to wolf down his meal as though he hadn't eaten in days. That made her smile... but when she commented on it, the dark

expression on his face made her falter.

"You seem hungry."

"Haven't eaten since breakfast," he said shortly.

"You didn't stop somewhere in the village?" She blinked, surprised.

"People are always raving about how good the food is at the tavern —"

"I couldn't get into the tavern," he said shortly. "I was barred entrance."

She frowned. "What? Why?"

"It seems that I've got a pretty horrendous reputation down in the village, despite not having visited in years," he said through gritted teeth. "I've earned myself a lifetime ban from the tavern, the blacksmith doubled his prices for me specifically, and ... well, I won't tell you about the liberties a young woman took with me until I explained to her that I'd never met her before in my life. She didn't believe me," he said, shaking his head. "I expect my brother filled her head with pretty lies. She looked crestfallen when I told her she'd been with my brother; that it hadn't been me, but what could I have done?"

"Has Duncan been using your name down there too?" she asked, so shocked that she'd completely forgotten the meal going cold on the table in front of her. "That's not okay, Brian, you're going to get into trouble —"

"He thinks it's funny," Brian said, shaking his head. "Honestly half the time I think he assumes that people know he's joking —"

"I don't think that's true," Audra said, more sharply than she'd intended. "Brian, you have to talk to him. You can't let him be running around, ruining your reputation."

He frowned at her, clearly stung by that, and she felt a lurch in her chest as she realized how strident she'd been. She had to remember she was talking about his twin brother — his best friend, the person he was closest to in all the world. And as soft as she felt about him, as serious as her crush on him had become over the last few days, she knew that in the grand scheme of things, they didn't know each other so well. She couldn't force him into a position where he had to choose between his brother and her — she knew exactly how that choice would go. And she didn't want him to have to make it.

She bit her lip, frowning down at her meal as she tried to decide how to proceed. If she brought up Duncan's aborted attack on her now, Brian would just assume she was trying to discredit his brother further. Besides, he was tired and stressed from an awful day in the village, and she didn't want to put yet more stress on him, especially since he'd only gone down there as a favor to her and Fiona.

"I just don't like the idea of people thinking of you badly, that's all," she said softly, reaching across the table to give his hand a squeeze. He smiled back at her, clearly distracted, but with a renewed

warmth in his eyes that made her feel relieved. "Especially when I think of you so well."

"That's all that matters to me," he said with a smile, a little light returning to those blue eyes. "So long as you know who I am, let the village think what they may."

Still, it troubled her as she headed up to bed that night, and her dreams were full of strange spectres, hundreds of versions of the same faceless man, surrounding her and pursuing her along rocky clifftops, the ocean crashing and roaring hundreds of feet below...

It wasn't long before Fiona had yet more errands for Brian to run. Next was a letter that had to be delivered to William, a local alchemist, who was being prevailed upon to provide them with a powerful magnet — with the help of his wife, of course, who was yet another of the time-travelling women and, from what Fiona told Audra, quite a powerful alchemist in her own right. Audra had filled Fiona in on the unfortunate mix-up in the village, and the woman had frowned.

"Never did like Duncan," she said, clicking her tongue. "Honestly, I thought both of them were bad news, but it's possible that's only true of one."

"It doesn't help that he uses his brother's name half the time," Audra said, shaking his head. "I really wish Brian would talk to him."

"He doesn't want to see it." Fiona shrugged. They were watching Brian ride away through the gates from the steps of the Keep, headed for William's workshop and cottage, which was a short ride from the Keep. "That's family for you. Love," she added, rolling her eyes. "The fellow was right when he said it makes you blind. Anyway," she said briskly. "Soon enough we're going to have a working phone to play with. Maybe we can get some recordings of Duncan being an ass to show his brother."

Audra smiled at that prospect, though she had a suspicion it wouldn't help. Duncan had made it clear — through jokes and snide comments — that he didn't have much time for the advanced knowledges that the time-lost women had brought back with them from the future. He'd made one too many 'joking' comments about it being witchcraft for Audra's liking. She knew how dangerous that kind of joke could be, how quickly it could lead to a very unpleasant situation — Cora and Audrina had both told her tales of the witch-hunters who'd come to the Keep years ago, when they were both recent arrivals. And with her growing distrust of Duncan, she couldn't help but interpret his jokes as a threat.

She was in her chambers, reading the thick tome that sat at her bedside table and reflecting on how much she was looking forward to the prospect of getting back into her phone, when there came a tap at



the door. That surprised her — it was quite late, after dinner, and servants rarely disturbed her in the evenings. But when she opened the door, to her surprise she saw it was Brian, still wearing his riding clothes, a smile on his handsome face.

"It's me," he said — something he'd gotten into the habit of doing since she'd expressed her worries about getting the two of them mixed up. She still hadn't mentioned what had happened with Duncan in the dining hall the day before — part of her felt embarrassed, worried that she'd exaggerated the severity of the situation, and another part didn't want to make Brian feel like he had to choose between listening to her and trusting his brother. Still, she appreciated Brian going out of his way to make sure she knew who she was talking to. "I brought you something."

"Oh, yes?" She stepped back, feeling her heart beat a little bit faster. Brian hadn't been to her room before — she'd always assumed it was a bit too scandalous, to be alone in bedchambers with a man, unchaperoned... and from the way Brian hesitated a little before stepping into her room, she had a feeling her suspicions were correct. So what was he doing here? Her skin was tingling.

"William was able to build — whatever on earth this is — while I was there, with his lady wife's help, of course," he said, reaching into his bag and withdrawing a solid piece of metal.

"Oh! The magnet." She smiled, knowing that Fiona would be delighted to see this — and resolving not to bring it to her until the morning, aware that she wouldn't sleep until she'd used it in the generator. Brian went to put it on her bedside table, and she rushed to stop him, eyes wide — "No!"

"What?"

"It'll wipe the phone," she said breathlessly, taking the magnet and setting it safely on the table on the other side of the room.

"How?"

She hesitated. "I don't know. I just know that it will."

"Superstition?"

Audra couldn't help but laugh. "Not exactly, but... well, I suppose in a way." She had no idea how computers worked, really. In a way, it was a little like magic... she'd press buttons and trust that whatever complex programming had been put into the machine would do her bidding for her. In a way, it was a little like communing with spirits. Maybe the difference between magic and technology wasn't as marked as she'd always thought... but those thoughts quickly vanished as Brian stepped closer, his blue eyes burning.

"I've been thinking about you all day," he said softly, and she felt her heartbeat pick up again. The last few times they'd kissed, there had been an energy present, an intensity that had left her breathless

and somehow impatient, frustrated — as though there was something that she wanted from him that she wasn't quite getting from their kissing. Her body wanted more, wanted him pressed against her... and when she saw the desire burning in his eyes, she knew he felt the same.

"So have I," she said softly, looking back up at him, hoping he'd read in her expression and in her body what she wasn't even remotely brave enough to say out loud. And with that, his lips were on hers, his arms around her, and she leaned into him, thrilling to his touch, delighted that she had him all to herself in her chambers... no prying eyes to disturb them, no decorum to maintain around a chaperone or the curious gaze of passersby... finally, they had each other all to themselves.

**I**t wasn't long before they were undressing each other, Audra's heart pounding as he liberated her from the various layers of her gown, surprisingly adept with the various buckles and laces that stood between him and her body. Had he helped his wife with her own gown? she wondered. Surprisingly, that didn't make her feel jealous or strange. He'd loved Annie... and he loved her, too, for who she was, not for her resemblance to his lost love. She trusted that — she knew that, deep in her gut when she looked at him. And the way his hands were roaming across the skin he'd exposed, part of her didn't care at all what was motivating his touch... she just wanted more of it. More of him, as his kisses grew deeper and more passionate, roaming across her face, her throat, down to her collarbones, lighting fires that shot all the way down to her belly, where the heat of her desire was rapidly becoming uncontrollable.

They fell into her narrow bed together when they were mostly undressed. Strange, how comfortable she felt with him, how confident being naked around another person — she didn't think she'd exposed anything more intimate than her upper arms to another human being since she was a small child.

She'd thought about what her first time would be like, of course... what young girl hadn't? Not that she was particularly young to be losing her virginity, at twenty... but then again, it wasn't as though she'd had many opportunities to get rid of it, was it? She'd always thought it was going to be unpleasant, awkward... that her husband because of course, her parents were firmly in favor of her waiting until she was married would have to teach her what to do, guide her through, probably be very patient with her until she got the hang of it. But now, with Brian in her arms, the two of them breathing heavily as their temperature spiked in the cozy little room, she'd never felt more confident in her life. It was as though her body knew exactly what to do, as though some instinct far more ancient than her parents'

warnings had taken over.

Still, he slowed as his hands roamed across her body, stoking fires in her as they went... and she caught that intense blue gaze, the fierce passion in it tempered by caution. Checking in with her — making sure she was okay, that she wanted this. She all but groaned, wrapping her arms around him, encouraging him wordlessly... and that, it seemed, was all the permission he needed. She could feel his manhood pressing hard against her thigh, and she bit her lip. Hadn't they told her it would hurt the first time? That she'd bleed, that she'd find it uncomfortable, that it was a taste that she'd have to acquire? But then his fingertips were inside her, stroking pleasure from her body the likes of which she'd never dreamed of, and she completely forgot that she was supposed to be expecting pain — he drew her closer and closer to a peak with his hands alone, and by the time he replaced his fingers with his manhood she was all but screaming his name.

No pain, no discomfort, no sense of pressure or tearing or hurting — all she felt was relief when he finally slid himself to the hilt inside her, groaning against her throat as he took her. He drove himself into her again and again, each thrust of his hips driving more pleasure through her body, and Audra moaned against his throat, the blankets tangling beneath her back as she wrapped her legs around his waist and drew him closer, urged him on as she approached a climax she'd never experienced before — and yet, somehow, felt as natural and familiar as stretching her muscles. He was close, too — she could sense rather than see the trembling of his body, the way he was holding himself back, waiting for her first — and when she felt her orgasm take hold of her, she felt him, too, shuddering and groaning against her throat as he came.

The aftermath felt like she was suspended in some kind of liminal space between sleeping and waking. Her breath was still coming hard in her lungs, her body drenched in sweat — hers or Brian's, it was hard to say. Maybe a mixture of both. But she felt so utterly replete, so sated, so content that she may as well have been asleep — she didn't think she could have gotten up even if Brian hadn't collapsed on top of her, his heavy limbs pinning her to the bed as he lay there, clearly as exhausted by their lovemaking as she was. She shifted just a tiny bit, what felt like hours later, and Brian moved too, quickly, murmuring an apology for crushing her.

"Don't be sorry," she murmured sleepily, blinking a few times before gazing at him.

His face was still flushed, and his hair was askew, and he looked just about as handsome as she'd ever seen him as he smiled sleepily back at her, propping himself up on one elbow and tracing an idle

pattern on her bare shoulder with the fingertips of the other hand.

"That was amazing," he said softly, looking at her closely for her response.

All she could do was nod, fighting the bizarre urge to blush, as though what they'd just done was somehow less intimate than actually talking about it. Silly, really... she nestled a little closer to him, feeling her body temperature dropping a little in the aftermath of their lovemaking, and he put an arm around her shoulder, drawing her close.

"I shouldn't stay," he said drowsily — it was either minutes or hours later, impossible to tell with how sleepy she felt whether she'd drifted off or not. "Not that I don't want to, but... well. People will talk."

"You'll just have to sneak out real careful," she murmured, still half asleep, unwilling to let his warm body go. Not when she was so comfortable here... besides, what if she woke up in the morning and wanted another round? That was a surprising thought, and she grinned to herself a little. "It'll be fine."

"The servants will come in to change your bedding in the morning," he reminded her softly, his voice low and resonant in his chest. "They'll see us both here. The whole castle will know by breakfast."

"I'll hide you," she protested. "Under the sheet. Look."

He chuckled as she pulled the quilt over his head — but to her dismay, he was getting up, putting his clothes back on with a look of keen regret on his face. She couldn't help but laugh at how heartbroken he looked to be leaving her.

"It's fine," she told him firmly. "Go back to your own bed. We'll keep this between us, hm?" She hesitated, not wanting to bring this particular subject up — but it was now or never, wasn't it? "Do you mind... not telling Duncan?"

He blinked, looking a little confused — but he nodded agreement before leaning down to kiss her goodnight. Then she was alone, curled up in her bed, the scent of him still lingering on her sheets to reassure her that it hadn't all been a dream... and when she fell asleep, not long after, her sleep was deep and complete, without a single nightmare to disturb her.

Did she look different? she wondered the next morning. Heading down to breakfast, she felt like there was some kind of spotlight on her... something that would tell the people who saw her that something had changed, that she'd crossed some great threshold into adulthood. Silly, really, how much significance people put on having sex for the first time — especially for women. Did they make such a big deal of men losing their virginities? Did they behave as though a

man who'd had sex was a completely different person to a man who hadn't? Then why did they do the same for women? She hadn't changed.

Well, maybe a little. She certainly wanted to have sex with Brian again — as soon as humanly possible. Now that she knew what it was actually like, the fantasies she'd occasionally indulged herself with could get a lot more graphic and specific... making use of memory and not just fantasy to distract her from what she was doing... she blushed a little as she nearly walked straight into a group of guards, who gave her a curious look as they headed past her.

It wasn't long before Brian joined her for breakfast, as he so often did — and even if they sat down together as they always did, a discrete distance from one another as decorum would insist, the atmosphere between them was electric, the secret smiles they kept exchanging thrilling Audra to the core. They talked, though, not of the night of passion that they'd spend together the previous evening — but of the day's errands. It seemed that Fiona had asked Brian to go on yet another trip into town.

"Are you sure you want to go again?" she asked, raising an eyebrow as she thought of what he'd said about his last trip into town. "Didn't everyone... kind of try to chase you out of town with torches and pitchforks?"

"It wasn't that bad," Brian said drily, though there was a slightly worried look on his face regardless. "And the only way I can clear my name is to keep returning to the village until they see that I'm not so bad."

She could think of another way, she thought with pursed lips... but she wasn't going to start on about Duncan now, not when she and Brian were getting on so well. "Why don't I come with you? I'd love to see the village... and if you're there, you can stop me saying anything too suspicious about where I'm from." That had been the main objection to the prospect of Audra going too far from the Keep — but she was itching to explore the area a little more, to see the village that everyone kept talking about. "Besides, you might need someone to vouch for you."

"Aye, I suppose if I had a pretty girl at my side, they'd think again about my reputation as a terrible womanizer," Brian said, raising an eyebrow at her. "If you want to spend more time with me, you can just say so."

"Fine, I want to spend more time with you," she said immediately, winning a laugh from him that made her heart skip a beat. God, his laugh was lovely. She could remember that laugh from last night, low and throaty, pressed against her skin... she felt herself blush and quietly but forcefully put those memories away, to be revisited again

when she wasn't in quite such a public space. But Brian was nodding.

"Aye, if you'd like to come with me, I'd be glad of the company. A quick visit to the blacksmith and back again, though," he warned. "We'll not be staying the night or anything too exciting."

"Great," she said, smiling. She was already looking forward to it. A ride down to the village, with Brian at her side — a new place to explore, and, with any luck, she could vouch for Brian if people mixed him up with his terrible twin brother again.

**A**fter breakfast, she headed up to her room to grab a cloak for riding. Though they weren't planning on being out late, there was a chill wind that day and she didn't much fancy catching her death of cold on her first ride to the village. She was excited to see it, to spend a little time mingling with the locals, with people who didn't necessarily know her whole story... but at the same time, she was a little apprehensive about accidentally giving herself away. She'd stay quiet, she told herself firmly. Let Brian do all the talking. She was just there to observe — kind of a tourist, in the strangest possible way.

She was very grateful that she'd already known how to ride a horse when she'd arrived here — the other women had told stories of having to learn to ride in a hurry, with Marianne teaching the majority of those not already versed in the equestrian crafts. She swung aboard the bay gelding that had been led out for her when she got down to the courtyard — Brian was already mounted on the mare she remembered him riding that first night they'd met. At least, she thought it had been him... there was a chance it had been his brother. Duncan was around the Keep somewhere today, she knew... she hoped like hell he was busy flirting with some girl or other and didn't see them leaving. Otherwise, he'd insist on coming with them, and the whole day would be ruined.

Was it unkind, to think like that? She didn't care. Ever since he'd tried to force himself on her while pretending to be Brian, she'd had less and less sympathy for the man... and more and more concern that there was something deeply wrong with him. Maybe that was a subject she could raise with Brian today. They'd be spending a fair bit of time together — he'd said they should get lunch in the tavern in town, though there'd been a slightly worried look on his face when he'd said it since he'd told her that he'd been banned from there.

"I'll vouch for you," she promised as they rode through the gates to the Keep. "I'll tell everyone in town that it was your brother who



earned you both that terrible reputation."

"Don't put yourself out for me," he told her firmly. "I'd never hear the end of it from the Laird's Lady wife if you got into some kind of trouble."

"I'll be careful," she said. Not for the first time, she wished she could perfect the art of a reasonable Scottish accent. Sure, she was a newcomer to the area, which always drew attention, but she suspected that the real thing that made people sit up and take note of the time travelers was their strange accents... accents from a country that hadn't been settled by English speakers yet.

It was a beautiful ride. The dirt road wound down the hill toward the village, which came into view quickly as their horses clopped methodically along the road toward town — she could tell by the way she barely had to steer the bay that the horse had made this trip dozens of times. They passed the paddock on the way where the people of the Keep grazed the horses during the day, putting them away in stalls in the stables at night — there were a couple of men working on the gates to the paddock, conducting a repair. Brian seemed a little distracted by that, but they quickly passed the paddock and headed on toward the village.

On the way, she did her best to explain just what it was they were doing. Brian was more than happy to have her along on errands with him, which she appreciated — but it was clear that he had no idea what the strange gadgets he was procuring were for. And fair enough, too, she thought with a grin — he'd been born well before the invention of smartphones, after all. She did her best to explain electricity with her layman's knowledge, and then to explain what a phone was... he was interested, but clearly utterly baffled by what she was telling him, and he kept trying to handwave it all away as magic, which irritated her.

"It's not magic," she told him firmly. "It's technology. There's a difference. Phones work because of — circuitry, and electricity, and a whole network of towers that send the messages back and forth. It's not magic, it's science."

"Whatever it is, it sounds like magic," was all he'd say, shrugging his shoulders.

She supposed she'd have to be satisfied with that. To someone not in the know, mobile phone technology did sound rather like magic. It was unfortunate that she wouldn't be able to make any calls on it, of course... but it would be good to be able to get into the memory of the thing, to show people photos of the time she was from. Part of her was just looking forward to having some real, concrete evidence that what had happened to her was real. She'd awoken from a dream the other night in which she'd come to the conclusion that she'd really been

born in this time, and that the entire future was just a long and bewitching dream she'd had one night. But the photos would prove otherwise.

And more to the point, Fiona had said, the phone would be helpful in easing new arrivals into their stay in Scotland. There was no sign that the influx of time travelers was stopping any time soon — the curse that Morag had laid had had plenty of time, before it had been stopped by Delilah, to take the lives of plenty of hapless women associated with MacClaran men. There would be other women after Audra, other women who needed their care and help... and if her phone would help with that, help them feel a little less alone and terrified, then she was determined to make sure the phone was ready to go.

And part of her, too, wanted to listen to the dozens of messages her parents had left on her phone that night. It had been an awful fight, and she knew the messages were going to hurt her terribly... but the only alternative was never hearing their voices again, and she wasn't willing to take that. Not yet.

They arrived in the village midmorning, and she could tell that Brian was tense. They made straight for the blacksmith, which was a much bigger and more elaborate setup than the smith she'd seen by the stables up at the Keep. That was mostly there for the good of the horses, making shoes for them, though she had heard the Keep's smith did a little bit of weapon repair and maintenance for the Watch, as well as built things for Fiona whenever she needed him to if he had the supplies. This smith, though, was much more extensive, with a handful of men working, not just one.

The man who greeted them looked irritated when he saw Brian's face, his jaw tightening and a dark look flickering through his eyes. "And which one of you is it today?" he asked, his mocking tone making it clear that he didn't believe Brian was a twin at all. Audra felt her heart sink as she stepped up closer to Brian's side, wondering if she could vouch for him. But the smith's eyes were hard when they fell on her, and he grunted. "Riding around with yet another young woman. You ought to know better, lass."

Brian looked down at her, his expression dismayed. "We're just here to collect the materials for Laird Donal," he said softly.

Fiona had insisted that all the orders be made under her husband's name, not her own — it seemed that the Laird could get away with making strange requests, but it was likely that if they came from women, they risked suspicions of witchcraft taking hold.

"Sure you are. And to drink yourself into a stupor in the tavern before vanishing without paying your bill, I'd warrant."

A flash of annoyance on Brian's face. "That was my brother."

This time, the man actually grunted laughter. "Oh, aye. Your twin brother. I've got one of those, too, pesky fellow —"

"He's telling the truth," Audra said with a frown, stepping forward. "I know them both, I've seen them together. This is Brian — you're thinking of Duncan."

"No, it was definitely Brian MacClaran who's been causing all this trouble," the smith scoffed. And before Audra could react or argue, he turned on his heel and disappeared into the back, clearly deciding it was time to get Brian's package to him and shoo him out of the shop. She followed him out, feeling her heart ache at the defeated look on his face... though he gave her a quick smile as he attached the parcel to his horse's saddle.

"I appreciate you trying," he said, shaking his head. "Unfortunately, Duncan usually makes it a little hard to explain his... well, his behavior." He straightened, clearly trying to put on a brave face for her. "Shall we have lunch? I think they'll serve me in the Tavern and not hold to the banning, so long as I pay ahead of time."

The tavern was delightful — a multi-story building on the corner of the main street in town that was already busy and bustling despite it only being late morning. There were all kinds of people present — families with their children, a couple of grim-faced men covered in dust at the bar who Brian told her were families from the surrounding area, and even a few guards she vaguely recognized from the Keep — it seemed that patrols were often made down here in the village, and those on patrol tended to opt for the Tavern for their midday meal.

Sure enough, there was a similarly tense energy from the bar staff as there had been from the blacksmith, and Audra felt her heart sink at the prospect that they might be turned away. But Brian was civil, and apologetic — she tried to speak up for him and tell the staff that he wasn't his brother, but the same looks of borderline disbelief were given to her. Thankfully, though, coin spoke a language that words couldn't hope to compete with, and with a few copper pieces handed over to the bar staff, they were seated at a table together with mugs of ale. And if they got more than a few dirty glances from the serving staff, well... she could tolerate that.

It almost felt like being on a date — a lot closer to the conventional dates she'd heard about back in her own time, when a man would take a woman out to lunch or dinner to get to know her better. She flushed a little at the memory that when it came to getting to know each other, they'd already gone to just about the most intimate place two people could go to... and she smiled when he reached out to take her hand in his, wondering if he was thinking the same thing.

Their food came quickly... but the serving maid lingered for a long

moment, her blue eyes flicking from Audra to Brian with a look of palpable irritation on her face. She was around Audra's age, this girl, maybe a little younger — there was something teenager-ish to the pout of her lips and the quick snap of vexation in her eyes, and Audra looked up at her curiously. She looked annoyed, certainly — but not with Audra. With Brian. Audra felt a sinking feeling in her stomach when she realized the girl was about her height and build, with a mane of long dark hair she was currently keeping tied behind her head — but looked a lot like Audra's.

Could this be the girl that Duncan had been heard bragging about, back at the Keep? The girl he'd bothered and seduced down in the village? And if so — what was she going to say about seeing his double here at the tavern with another woman?

**B**ut maybe she'd gotten it wrong. After another long, lingering

stare, the girl turned on her heel and disappeared, and Audra let out a breath she hadn't realized she'd been holding. Brian looked up at her curiously, and she shrugged her shoulders, not wanting to get into the paranoid assumption she'd just made about the way the girl was looking at them both. Right now, she didn't want to talk about Duncan — she wanted to hear about Brian, about the man she was actually spending time with, not his jerk of a brother.

He entertained her a little with stories of growing up in the Keep, the rambunctious life he'd led as a small child racketing around a castle — but there was a lingering energy, a discomfort she couldn't help but notice every time he mentioned Duncan. The elephant in the room... his brother, who kept ruining things for them, who kept destroying their reputation... no, she thought, frowning a little to herself. He destroyed his own reputation. Brian had never been anything other than good and kind.

He got up at one point to head up to the bar to grab them some more drinks, and she was left to herself to think. Should she take this opportunity to raise the subject of Duncan, to really discuss her fears and worries about his brother? She'd been worried about ruining the atmosphere of their day out together, but it seemed like that was more or less the case anyway... Duncan was present without being present, in the way the townsfolk clearly hated Brian or at least, hated who they thought he was. But before she could give the matter much more thought or begin to prepare an opening statement to bring up the subject, someone had slid into the seat opposite her — and it wasn't Brian.

"I need to talk to you."

It was the tavern girl. Her blue eyes were worried, not angry, and Audra felt herself settle a little, worried as she had been that she was about to get into some juvenile fight for the affections of the man she

was with.

"That man you're with, he's not what he seems."

She fought the urge to laugh. The girl was absolutely right — but not for the reasons she thought. "I know —"

"Listen," the girl said quickly, looking over her shoulder. "I haven't got much time, I've got to be back up at the bar in a minute but listen to me. That man's bad news. I was with him a few nights ago, here in the tavern. He was a sweet-talker and I'll admit I gave him a lot more than a decent girl ought to with a fellow she's just met. I don't want to see the same thing happen to you."

"Listen, I really appreciate what you're doing," Audra said softly, wanting to reach out and squeeze the girl's hands. She was trying to warn her, trying to protect her from Duncan — there was something so heartwarming about that. "But you don't understand."

"I understand Brian MacClaran very well," the girl said darkly, her face shadowed. She glanced over her shoulder — then reached down to tug up the long sleeve of the tunic she was wearing, revealing a wrist that was bottled with dark bruises in the shape of a hand. "This is what he did when I told him no, lass."

Audra felt her gut clench, her heart pounding at the physical evidence of Duncan's disrespect for women. She'd known he was unpleasant, known he was a womanizer who didn't have a problem with forcing himself on unwilling women — but she hadn't realized just how willing he was to get violent. This was a very, very bad sign... and the girl rolled her sleeve down quickly when she heard Brian's footsteps behind her, the fear that flashed across her face at the sight of him making Audra's heart break for her.

"Audra? Who's this?"

Audra took a sharp breath — but the girl's face had darkened with rage at his voice, and she rose to her feet, turning on him with all the fury that Audra had sensed lingering beneath her calm, sweet surface. "Who's this?" she mocked, her voice lifting to a pitch that drew the attention of at least a dozen patrons of the crowded pub. Brian stood there, two flagons of ale in his hands, looking utterly nonplussed. "Who's this? What, you don't remember the woman you brutalized not three nights ago?"

"That wasn't me," Brian said quickly, clearly joining the dots as quickly as Audra had. "I'm sorry, Miss, it would have been my brother you met —"

"Are you or are you not Brian MacClaran?"

"Aye," he said through gritted teeth, "but I'm not the man who —"

But the crowd had turned ugly. It seemed that the girl was well-liked, and as awful as Audra felt to see the group turning on the man that she loved like they were, there was something kind of

heartwarming about how willing they were to go in to defend the girl. It wasn't long before Brian was being physically shoved out of the tavern, a look of defeat on his face that broke Audra's heart a little.

"You can stay," the girl said quickly, reaching out to grab her wrist as she headed for the door as well. "His wrongdoings aren't your fault — stay and finish your drink."

"He paid for his ale this time, at least," the publican muttered, shaking his head. "Awfully brave of him to show his face here again, after the scene he made the other night."

"It really wasn't him," Audra said, shaking her head, wanting to scream at them but knowing she needed to stay calm. "I know how it looks, but — he has a twin brother, you see, a twin brother who often uses his name to discredit him —"

But the looks of pity on the faces of the people standing around told her well and truly that they didn't believe a word she was saying. She knew how it sounded — knew she sounded like a deluded child speaking in his defense like that, knew it sounded like she was parroting some unlikely story he'd told her about why he had such a terrible reputation... but the irritating thing was, it was true. She knew firsthand, she'd seen for herself what a terrible person his brother was... but how could she get that across to them? How could she make them believe her?

She couldn't. So, after another lingering look of pity from the tavern girl, she sighed and turned to go, trying to ignore the people behind her calling out to her, telling her that she could always come to them if she needed help. She wasn't going to need help. Not with Brian, at any rate... though the jury was still out on Duncan. God, it was annoying. If only she could get the two of them into town, to show everyone once and for all that there were two brothers... of course, in those kinds of situations Duncan was always very careful to be his best, most charming self. It was only when confusion was likely that he let his true colors show.

She found Brian tacking up the horses, a dejected look on his face as he tightened the girth on one — though he tried his best to put a brave face on for her as she approached, something that made her heart ache. "That sucked in there," she said blankly. That drew a laugh from him, if a weak one, and she risked a quick embrace, slipping an arm around his waist and drawing him close to her for a moment. "I'm sorry you've got this reputation. It's not your fault."

"Aye, it's not. My brother does get carried away sometimes, and it's not their fault that we look so alike..."

She gritted her teeth. Why was Brian always so determined to believe that the mix-ups between them were an accident, and not deliberate on the part of his malevolent brother? What exactly made

him so determined to defend the man? But before she could raise that subject, they were interrupted — and Brian cleared his throat, shifting away from her as footsteps heralded the approach of yet another person. She tensed, ready to argue if it was someone from the tavern trying to get her away from her 'dangerous' companion, only to blink in surprise at the looming black-clad figure who was approaching them.

She'd met him before — his face was familiar, but it wasn't until he spoke a short greeting to her and Brian that his English accent placed him for her. "Sir Baldric! Good to see you again."

His gaze was cryptic when he glanced between her and Brian — and too late, she remembered what his impression had been of Brian... or more accurately, what his impression had been of Duncan, who'd led both him and Lord Weatherby to believe that he was Brian. God, that was getting annoying.

"Audra Kendall, wasn't it? I trust you're settling in well."

"Yes, getting there," she said. There was something about his body language — something oddly familiar, something that reminded her of all the people standing around her in the tavern. She realized with a sigh that he was there to protect her from Brian. Brian could tell, too — she knew from the dejected slump of his shoulders that he'd accurately inferred that he was considered a threat, here. And she was no expert, but Baldric definitely didn't seem like the kind of guy she'd want to come up against in a fight.

"I've heard some interesting things about you, Brian MacClaran," Baldric said now, giving the man a sidelong look as he fidgeted, seemingly idly, with the hilt of the blade he carried at his hip. "You've been making quite a name for yourself here in the village. Just about everyone's talking about your... adventures."

Audra gritted her teeth — but it was Brian who spoke. "Lord Weatherby sent you to spy in the village again, then?" he asked, tilting his head innocently to the side. But the barb had hit home — she saw Baldric stiffen, eyes flashing with irritation.

"I'm simply delivering a few messages. I've one to bring up to the Keep, too."

"We could take it for you?" Audra suggested, eager to ease a bit of the tension here. But Baldric shook his head.

"I'd prefer to deliver it myself. You'll understand if I don't exactly trust your friend here."

Audra sighed heavily, fighting the urge to scream. "Sir Baldric, you have to understand — this is Brian, not Duncan —"

"That's right," Baldric said, narrowing his eyes. "It's Brian MacClaran who's on the knife-edge of being banned outright from the village itself. And to be frank, young lady, I won't be leaving you



alone in his presence. Not with the things I've heard about him, the things he's done to young girls like you."

"That's his brother," Audra snapped, bristling. "His brother's the one who played all those pranks while you were at the Keep the other week — Brian wasn't even there! He was halfway across the moors packing up their camp. Duncan just uses his brother's name."

Baldric looked at her intently for a long moment, then up at Brian, clearly not convinced. Audra gritted her teeth, wishing she could get Brian by the shoulders and shake him, yell at him to stand up for himself, to explain once and for all that it was Duncan who was responsible for all the bad behavior, not him... but maybe he didn't want to do that. Maybe he didn't want to properly confront the fact that his brother was... well, not a good man.

Sir Baldric looked thoughtful, though. "Either way," he said finally, giving them both a meaningful look. "I think I'd best ride with you back up to the Keep. Best not to be alone with the hostile town folk ready to have your head on a pike." He looked straight at Brian.

Audra sighed.. Still — maybe she could use the ride to convince Baldric that Brian wasn't the bad guy here. At this point, they needed all the allies they could get.

Sir Baldric's jet-black horse matched his outfit, something that

Audra had to resist the urge to giggle about. For all that Lord Weatherby seemed to be the fussy, fastidious one, she couldn't help but suspect that it wasn't an accident that Sir Baldric's entire ensemble matched so well... it made him intimidating, which was his job, of course, but it also seemed to be a fashion choice, for all that he'd probably deny it if questioned. They chatted idly as they rode, Baldric's horse between hers and Brian's — Brian was quiet on the ride, clearly still thinking about the scene in the tavern, but while her heart ached for him, she knew there was little she could say right now that was likely to make him feel better.

It seemed that Sir Baldric and Lord Weatherby knew the time-travelers quite well, overall — they seemed to have some kind of history with just about all of them, especially Scarlet, who it seemed was the descendant of a distant family relative. Scarlet had told her a little of the story, so it was amusing to hear it from Sir Baldric, who had clearly known both Scarlet and her ancestor reasonably well... and had been quietly pleased to see that the spirited young woman had returned to them, albeit in a different form. Strange, that Baldric and the English seemed to think of the time-travelers as reincarnations of the lost women, rather than descendants — it seemed like rather a Pagan approach to things, something that didn't seem to fit with their image at all. Still, Audra was mindful of asking too many questions. She liked Baldric, and if Scarlet trusted him so did she — but she still didn't want to incriminate herself too much as a Pagan, not in a setting where she could so easily be accused of witchcraft.

"Tell me about your brother," Baldric said abruptly, into a lull in the conversation broken only by birdsong and the sound of their horses' feet on the dirt road. "Tell me what kind of a man he is."

Audra glanced sideways, feeling her heart thump hard in her chest. The exact question she'd been longing to ask Brian but had always

shied away from... trust a man like Sir Baldric to just come straight out and ask it. He had his suspicions, she could tell — he didn't trust either Brian or Duncan as far as he could throw them, but maybe Audra's vote of confidence had gone some way to convincing him that it might be Duncan to blame for all the unpleasantness.

"He's... my brother," Brian said after a long pause, a troubled frown playing about his face as he kept his eyes firmly on the road. "We've always looked after each other."

"That's not what I asked," Baldric said flatly. "I want to know whether it's both of you I need to keep my eye on, or whether it's one troublemaker who's threatening the peace between the English and the Scottish in this area. I'm very interested in that peace," he added flatly. "I won't let it be threatened by some — foolish young blowhard."

"Threatening the peace between —" Brian was laughing. "I think you're overstating the significance of a few pranks."

"I'm not," Baldric said flatly. "Weatherby's an easy man to antagonize. He's been stewing ever since the visit, growing more and more furious about how he was treated. He's taking it as an insult. It's been all I could do to convince him to revisit the Keep, to allow the MacClarans to make up for the nature of the visit last time. That's the message I'm bringing. There's a reason he isn't here to deliver it in person," he added darkly. "He's been asking a lot of questions about the amount of manpower we have to call on."

A chill ran down Audra's spine. She'd gotten dangerous vibes from Lord Weatherby — which had mostly had to do with the knowledge that he had such power at his disposal, and that he was so easily insulted, offended, needled into action... what if Duncan's foolishness brought about a war between the English and the Scottish in this area?

"So I'll ask you again. Just what kind of a man is your brother?"

The silence stretched out as long as the road ahead of them, and Audra found herself biting her lip, even her horse shifting restlessly beneath her at the tension in the air. Finally, Brian spoke, and she couldn't help but exhale with relief. "He's incredibly loyal to me," Brian said softly, almost unwilling. "I know he'd die for me if he had to. He's always looking out for me, always protecting me, making sure the people around me have my best interests at heart... but I have to admit, Sir Baldric, I don't know what goes on in his head sometimes. There's a side to him..." He took a deep breath, shaking his head. "There's a side to him I can't say I understand."

They rode in thoughtful silence the rest of the way. She could tell that Baldric was pleased with this answer, that Brian had won a little favor from the man with his honesty — and she, for her part, was

keenly relieved to know that Brian wasn't completely blind to his brother's machinations, to the unpleasantness he brought with him. She'd wait until later to tell him about the injury the tavern girl had showed her, to mention the moment he'd tried to force himself on her while pretending to be Brian... for now, she was happy to simply ride back to the Keep, letting him reflect on what he'd just said about his brother.

The sun was low in the sky by the time they reached the Keep, the late afternoon sun basking everything in a pleasant orange glow. She and Brian spent some time putting the horses away, untacking them, rubbing them down and setting them up with some fragrant hay for their trouble. There were grooms around, and this work was technically theirs to do, especially since Brian had been on an errand for the Laird — but it seemed that Brian was eager to curry a little favor among them, especially with what had happened at Lord Weatherby's last visit. Baldric disappeared into the Keep to deliver his message to Laird Donal — he must have only spent a few minutes with the Laird, because it wasn't long before he was climbing back onto his horse and urging it out of the gate without so much as a wave goodbye.

Well, fair enough, Audra thought heavily. He had no reason to think his presence was welcome here — she wasn't oblivious to the dark looks that the locals shot the English when they were around. Tensions truly were on edge — she just hoped that Duncan's foolishness wouldn't be enough to threaten diplomatic relations.

With the horses put away, Brian and Audra headed inside to deliver what they'd collected from the blacksmith to Fiona. Unfortunately, she was nowhere to be found, and when they went to the chambers she shared with the Laird a posted guard informed them testily that the couple were not to be disturbed. Audra's heart sank as she put the pieces together — they were probably discussing the message from Lord Weatherby. That made sense, if it had been as heated as Baldric had implied that it would be. But he'd also said that there would be a visit from Lord Weatherby soon. That meant they still had a chance to win him over again.

The two of them headed down for an early dinner — it had been quite some time since the light meal they'd shared in the tavern, and in the end, they'd only managed to finish half their food before things had gotten unpleasant. Brian was still distracted, clearly lost in thought as he ate, and they didn't talk much over their meal... not until Fiona unexpectedly dropped in beside Audra, her pretty face uncharacteristically worn but her eyes still bright behind her thick glasses.

"Right then. You got the parts?"

"Aye, we collected them from the smith this morning," Brian said, reaching over to hand her the satchel he'd kept on his person.

"We tried to drop it off when we got back, but you and Donal were busy," Audra said, not wanting to pry... but very curious about the nature of the message Baldric had been delivering.

Fiona nodded, looking exhausted. "That's right. That blasted English fop is coming to visit tomorrow, he's told us. Wants to see progress on the stone tower, so he says, but we all know it's secretly a test of our hospitality. Wants us to bow and scrape for him after what happened last time."

The irritation on her face was clear — but Fiona and Audra had discussed the bad behavior of the twins at length, and she knew that it wasn't Brian who had been responsible for the pranks.

"I hope you'll keep a close eye on your brother," she said now, looking across the table with a stern expression. "I know he intends it all in good fun, or whatever, but we absolutely cannot have a repeat of what happened last time. Politically speaking, this is sensitive. You understand? It was all I could do to stop the Laird from sending both of you away for a few days."

Audra's eyes widened. She hadn't realized things had gotten that bad.

Brian, too, looked worried, and he nodded with his jaw tight and a tense expression on his face. "We'll be on our best behavior," he promised Fiona.

She nodded and then left them as quickly as she'd come, the satchel clutched under her arm. Probably off to work on the generator all night, Audra thought... though her usual amusement at Fiona's antics wasn't enough to boost her spirits. She was worried about Brian, worried about the visit from Lord Weatherby, worried most of all about Duncan... who was conspicuous by his absence tonight. Down in the village, stirring up more trouble? Or worse, in the Keep somewhere, sweet-talking the servants? She'd heard enough gossip to know that he was making his way through the young female servants at an alarming rate... and she had no doubt he was using Brian's name.

The two of them finished their meal in silence... but Brian's hand slipped into hers as they were leaving the hall, and he gave her a subtle little wink when she looked up at him. Holding her breath, she followed him, realizing with a rush that he wasn't walking her to her quarters as she'd expected... but instead seemed to be taking her a different way, to his own chambers. A brief lurch of fear as she wondered whether he shared the room with his brother... but no, it seemed the two men had finally been given different rooms.

It felt so good to have the door closed behind them... to be alone

with him, to be able to melt into his arms and kiss him without the fear of someone watching them, making assumptions about who they were, about what he was doing when he kissed her, assuming that she was another victim of his womanizing, looking at her with nothing but pity... no. Here with him, finally alone, they could finally be themselves.

And Audra intended to use as much of the evening as she could taking full advantage of that fact.

**I**t felt so good to distract each other by making love. Now that she knew a little more about what she was doing, she could feel her confidence growing — feel herself getting more and more confident with him as they explored each other's bodies, their pace more slow and relaxed than the explosion of built-up passion from the other night. It felt so good to be alone together, to be in the embrace of his slightly larger bed, skin on skin, nothing separating them but a few inches of warm air beneath the blankets...

She lost count of how many times they had each other, and with no clock in the room it was impossible to tell how long they'd been making love when they finally collapsed, exhausted, and spent, in each other's arms. Her body was glowing like she'd just been for a five-mile run and it took her a little while to catch her breath... his warm arms around her and the soft tickle of his breath against her cheek were such pleasant sensations that she hoped it was still early, yet. She almost didn't want to fall asleep, for fear of bringing the morning sooner — so instead of letting the tempting blanket of sleep swallow them, they talked, long into the night. She told him a few stories from back home, laughing as she had to stop every few minutes to explain some modern technology or other that was integral to the story making sense. He was especially interested in every mention of her phone. It seemed he was doing his best to understand the device that he was going to so much trouble to help Fiona build a generator for.

Then a silence fell, and she became aware that he was gazing at her, a soft, thoughtful look on his face that made her feel simultaneously delighted and a little nervous. There was something so vulnerable about it, so open, the warm light of desire and affection in those bright blue eyes, the soft, slightly wondering smile as he pushed her hair back from her face and leaned in to press a soft kiss to her cheek.

"I want to make a good life for you, Audra," he said softly, surprising her.

She always loved the sound of her name in his accent, the way the vowels and consonants almost seemed to purr from his throat... and what he'd actually said made her heart skip a beat, too.

"I want us to be happy together."

"I'm happy now," she said softly... but she couldn't help but hesitate, thinking of his brother, thinking of the unpleasantness that she'd been doing her level best to put aside, at least for tonight. "I'm happy with you, Brian," she added, stressing the pronoun just a little.

He smiled, a little sadly.

"We'll dodge the curse, this time around," he promised her. "I'll do everything I can to make sure that my luck has changed for good. I'm yours, Audra, if you'll have me. For as long as you want me."

They fell into each other's arms again, then, their kisses moving from tender to passionate as their bodies stirred once more into the throes of lovemaking... but it wasn't quite enough to distract her completely from the unspoken elephant in the room. The curse that he was referring to was a thing of the past — her life wouldn't be threatened by any supernatural forces, the way his wife's had been. But something about the way he'd spoken told her that he was still worried that they were doomed, somehow... that his 'bad luck' was lingering in wait, ready to claim another victim. But was he really unlucky? she wondered. Or was it his brother who'd caused just about every disaster in his life so far? Well, nearly every disaster, she told herself. It might have been Duncan's fault that they'd been banished from the Keep all those years ago, but Annie's death wasn't his fault — that was all to do with Morag's curse.

Wasn't it?

They fell asleep in each other's arms sometime before dawn, exhausted and replete, and when they woke it was a lot later than she was accustomed to rising. Brian swore a little when he realized the time, but his eyes were dancing with amusement as he dressed quickly — she joined him, marveling a little at how quickly she'd become accustomed to all the various layers of the gowns she put on each day. Compared to her first clumsy attempts to dress herself solo, she was an old pro now... but Brian still stepped in to help her lace the corset, an oddly tender gesture, and she smiled back at him. Annie had taught him well. Strange, that she never felt jealous of his first wife... maybe it was because she'd been thinking of her as her own ancestor, not some stranger, a rival for her love's attention...

It was a pleasant morning... and one she was grateful for later. Because no sooner had she set foot in the Keep that chaos seemed to break out over her. For a start, the whole Keep was alive with hustle



and bustle — it seemed that Lord Weatherby's visit had been scheduled for a few days' time not this afternoon as Fiona had thought, and Mary MacClaran was determined to do a full spring clean to make sure the place was shining and spotless for the visit — no more mistakes like last time, the servants were heard to mutter.

But there was something else going on, too — something that drew more than a few disapproving stares from gaggles of servants in the corridors, who broke off from low, muttered conversations to pin her and Brian with angry stares as they passed. The third time it happened, she snapped. Grabbing Brian by the arm and telling him to wait for her, she strode right up to the little gathering of four young women, demanding to know what they were gossiping about.

"I'd watch yourself with him if I were you," the shortest woman said, thrusting her chin forward with her green eyes shining with anger. "He's had just about every woman in the Keep, and he won't be treating you any different just because you're one of those strangers."

Of course, she thought numbly. Of course, they couldn't get through so much as a morning without Duncan's foolishness causing them problems. Well, she needed to get to the bottom of this one way or another — so she feigned ignorance, looking over her shoulder to where Brian was waiting patiently a little further down the hall. "What do you mean?"

"It's all come out overnight," another girl said quickly, her own face alight with fascination. Somehow, Audra got the impression that this girl was just a bystander — that her own insight into the situation wasn't personal, that she was just enjoying the chaos. Audra had never liked people like that. "So far, six of his conquests have found out about each other."

"It's getting grim," the third girl said with a shake of her head, clearly worried. "There are fights and all sorts. Mary's livid. With Lord Weatherby's important visit next week and all, we really can't be sparing any time for fighting and the like."

"Thanks for warning me," Audra said, meaning it. She was always touched by the kindness of women, going out of their way to try to protect one another from being preyed on by unpleasant men... even if it sounded like a few of them might be at each other's throats over the infidelities of 'Brian'. "But listen — it's not Brian who's been doing this. It's his twin brother, Duncan. I know they look the same, and Duncan often says he's Brian to confuse things even more... but I promise, Brian's a good man."

"Is that what he told you?" the blue-eyed girl said drily. "You're more gullible than I thought. Ma'am," she added, quickly... and before Audra could respond, the little group had rushed away, clearly deep in conversation and a little worried, perhaps, that that last comment

might draw Audra's ire.

She rejoined Brian, who gave her a familiar, dejected look as she slipped her arm into his.

"More of Duncan's friends," she said, shaking her head. "Brian — I really think you should talk to him about the way he uses your name. It's gaining you a bad reputation around here."

"Aye, perhaps," he said softly — and she narrowed her eyes.

"No. Not perhaps. You need to make him stop. It's starting to affect me, now. Those girls all thought you were taking advantage of me, that you were lying about who you were just so you could sleep with me."

"That's not what I'm —"

"I know that!" she snapped, feeling irritation flare in her chest. "Of course I know that. I just hate being the only person in the damn castle who knows that. Everyone feels sorry for me. I hate it," she said again, feeling frazzled. How else could she describe it to him?

But he nodded, squeezed her hand, promised to talk to his brother about it all.

It would have to be enough, she decided, shaking her head. It was hard to feel especially positive about it, though... especially when Duncan confronted both of them in the entrance hall, a serious look on his face.

"Brian, we have to talk," Duncan said loudly — and that immediately drew the attention of the dozen or so people who were crowded around. It was clear that the indiscretions had spread far and wide... even the guards seemed curious to witness this particular altercation. "I've been hearing all sorts of rumors."

"So have I," Brian said, frowning a little as he glanced around the hall at their impromptu audience. Audra could feel her heart pounding dully in her chest — this was clearly a setup, this was obviously something that Duncan had planned, and she had a bad feeling about how it was going to go down. "I've been meaning to talk to you about it for quite some time. Duncan, you have to stop —"

"You have to be more responsible," Duncan said quickly, cutting him off — and a murmur of agreement went up in the audience. "The way you've been treating all these poor girls... it's not acceptable. You're my brother and I love you, but I won't let you treat women so poorly."

"It hasn't been me," Brian said, his eyes widening. "I haven't been —"

"I know what I've heard," Duncan said with a shrug. "We've all heard the stories, haven't we?" He appealed to the people standing around, all of whom nodded — and then his hard blue eyes flicked to Audra, who gritted her teeth. "I mean... why have you been spending

so much time with Miss Audra here? I do hope he hasn't taken advantage," he added solicitously, a gleam in his eye that made her feel sick. It was Duncan who'd taken advantage, Duncan who'd been sleeping around, Duncan who'd pitted all these poor girls against each other... but she had to admit, this scene didn't make it look that way. Not with Audra there, holding Brian's arm...

"Duncan, I —"

"The Laird was very kind to take us back in," Duncan said firmly, giving Brian a meaningful look. "I'm warning you, brother — you need to remember that we're here on Laird Donal's good grace, nothing more. Think about that the next time you decide to chase a pretty face."

And with that, he was gone, leaving a rather shellshocked-looking Brian standing in the entrance hall, receiving cool glances from the crowd that had assembled to watch the confrontation.

Audra couldn't help but sigh, rubbing her forehead wearily. That conversation literally could not have gone any worse. At this rate, everyone in the castle was going to think Brian was a monster by nightfall. And on top of that, she was going to look like an absolute fool for continuing to trust him and spend time with him.

What the hell were they going to do about this?

The morning was tough. The whisperings of the servants didn't

stop, and Brian was clearly feeling utterly dejected by the confrontation — he was quiet, difficult to talk with, clearly lost in thought about his brother. Audra was torn between dismay at how bad he was feeling, and a kind of cautious hope that he might finally be coming to terms with the person his brother really was. Maybe this wake-up call was exactly what he needed to finally realize that Duncan had been pulling the wool over his eyes all these years.

But after lunch, a bright spot appeared on the horizon. Fiona found her in the courtyard, looking elated and sleep deprived, her blonde hair frazzled and her blue eyes full of joy. She grabbed Audra's wrist and tugged her to a more secluded spot — then told her that the generator was ready, that it was just about set up and ready to go at the alchemist's cottage, and to bring the phone and the charger along that afternoon to make sure that it worked.

"Bring Brian," she added with a vague gesture toward the Keep. "From what I've heard around the place, he might need a bit of a break from all the gossip, huh?"

"It's pretty bad," Audra admitted, shaking her head. "You know it's Duncan, not Brian, who's been doing all the —"

But Fiona was clearly distracted. She agreed with a vague little nod, but Audra could tell she was just itching to get the generator sorted... so, shaking her head, she turned and headed up to her room to grab her phone and its charger. On the way back down with the phone and charger tucked safely in the bodice of her gown, she stopped by Brian's quarters to tap on the door, hoping against hope that she wouldn't encounter Duncan while he was there. But it was Brian who answered the door, looking a little worn out — but he seemed happy enough to accompany her to the alchemist's cottage. She half wanted to suggest they ride on the same horse, the way they had all those weeks ago when he'd first brought her to the Keep after

finding her by the side of the road... but she thought better of it. People were talking enough as it was.

The three of them rode together — Fiona, Audra, and Brian. The alchemist's cottage wasn't far from the Keep. William was a MacClaran — his wife Karin had been among the huge group that had greeted Audra on her first night at the Keep. She was an epidemiologist from Georgia, it turned out — another of the time-lost women who'd been sent through time to replace William's first wife, whom he'd lost some years ago. Audra was looking forward to seeing her again — and looking forward to getting her phone working again. It would be good to revisit her old life, to get some proof that she hadn't dreamed the future...

The cottage was beautiful, nestled just off the road in a cleared area that also featured a thriving vegetable garden. They headed inside straight away — it seemed William had known they were coming, as he was waiting on the doorstep for them. A tall, handsome man with bright blue eyes that reminded her a great deal of Brian — and of Duncan... he also had their same jet-black hair, though he kept his cut a little longer than they did. Brian greeted him affectionately, though she could tell there was a little bit of hesitation in William's face as he exchanged pleasantries with his cousin. Her heart sank. Had Duncan managed to alienate everyone in their family?

"Come in, come in. Karin's been fussing over the thing all morning," William said, the affection in his voice clear. Sure enough, the small-statured woman in the alchemist's workshop was deeply engaged with the device that had been constructed — Audra recognized the spool of copper wire that Brian had fetched, and a few of the bits and pieces that they'd brought from the village the previous day. Fiona must have ridden over in the night to deliver them, she thought with some amusement. The woman really did have a one-track mind when it came to these things.

"It'll take some fiddling around," Fiona said, waving a hand at Audra, Brian and William once Audra had handed over her phone and its charger.

"Why don't you give our guests something to drink, William?" Karin suggested brightly — and the man nodded, his blue eyes dancing with amusement as he led the two of them through to the kitchen.

"I know when I'm being dismissed," he confided in them once the door was shut, and Brian chuckled. "Karin and Fiona have been so excited about this project. I'm interested myself to see what this device has to show us."

They talked easily enough in the kitchen, sharing ale that William said was home-brewed, along with some freshly-baked, crusty bread

with lashings of fresh butter. She'd certainly been eating well since she came to medieval Scotland. But it wasn't long before conversation turned to the subject of the curse.

"Not to make things awkward," William said carefully. "But — well, Karin filled me in a little on your situation. Audra, are you the descendant of Brian's lost wife?"

She nodded, feeling a little strange about the question. "Yes, we think so. I look a lot like her, apparently. And —" She took a deep breath. They hadn't exactly discussed how public their relationship was, but William's wife was another of the time-stranded women — he must know what the deal was by now, right? "And we're together," she added, feeling a little juvenile with the wording — but she couldn't exactly call him her boyfriend, could she? That didn't seem very medieval Scotland. Brian smiled, taking her hand in his and squeezing it, and she felt a burst of relief that he wasn't annoyed with her. William smiled.

"Aye, I thought that might be the case. You make a lovely couple," he said, giving them both a nod. But there was a thoughtful look on his face, too. "And your brother, Brian? Is he well?"

Brian hesitated. "He's well enough," he said, his tone guarded. "He's been making a bit of trouble since we've been back at the Keep, though, I'm afraid."

William shook his head. "I did hear something about that," he said — but before the conversation could go on much further, Fiona was calling them in, her face alight.

"It's on!"

Bread and ale forgotten, the three of them rushed back into the workshop, Audra leading the way. There was her phone, connected carefully up to the generator — and her heart skipped a beat when she saw that the screen had lit up, the charging indicator visible on its screen. "Holy crap," she whispered, feeling a little overwhelmed. Five hundred years in the past, her phone was waking up again... and she crept a little closer, mindful of not disturbing the strange network of wires that connected the generator to the phone.

"It's very slow," Karin said, shaking her head. "It'll be a few days before it has a full charge. But it's working."

"It's working," Audra said, shaking her head. She grinned. "I suppose I'd better write my code down for you all —" But her eyes widened, because the phone's screen had shifted from the 'critically low battery' indicator to its usual lock screen. "Should I —"

"Go for it," Fiona said, clearly impatient. She unlocked the phone with her code, hands shaking, careful not to disturb it too much in case the charger came dislodged — and she felt tears spring to her eyes when her home page appeared. There on her background was a

photo of her and her parents, the one she'd had as her lock screen ever since she'd gotten the phone. It had been taken after church one weekend, when her father had been in an unusually silly mood, doing an extremely bad impression of the priest who'd led the service. She and her mother were both laughing with their arms around each other. She felt a tear drip down her face... then fought the urge to laugh as the notification popped up to advise her that she had twelve voicemail messages.

"You were popular, huh?" Fiona said, craning her neck to see the screen.

Both William and Brian looked utterly flabbergasted by the image on the screen... and Brian made a sound of surprise when Audra reached out to tap on the notification, the screen shifting to reveal her message bank.

"My parents," she said, shaking her head. "They were — well, we had a fight just before I was brought here. These are all going to be pretty mean, I bet."

"You don't have to play them in front of us," Karin said softly, reaching out to touch her shoulder. "If you want privacy—"

But she didn't want to wait another second to hear her parents' voices again — even if those voices were going to be angry. So she shook her head, and hit play on the voicemail, thankful that she'd opted for an app that downloaded and stored the messages on the phone's internal storage drive, so that you could still listen to your messages even if you were out of service range. She'd installed a lot of apps like that before she'd left, largely at her father's urging. Always a practical man.

The first message was her mother, and she braced herself for a tongue lashing... but then her eyes widened a little. It had been left half an hour or so after their argument, and she could tell right away that something was different. Her voice was soft, apologetic... and her eyes widened at the content of the message.

"Audra, I wanted to tell you how sorry I am." The woman's voice echoed around the little workshop — Brian and William were exchanging shocked glances, this being brand new technology to them, but the expressions Fiona and Karin were wearing as they looked at her were very different. "You were right — everything you said about your father and I not treating you like an adult, you were right. There are some lessons you need to learn on your own. We can't shelter you your entire life, can't try to control every step you take in the interests of protecting you. I just hope you know — it all came from love." Were those tears choking her mother's voice? "I love you so much, Audra, and I'm so proud of you, and you're growing into such an impressive young woman —" Then there was a brief silence, a

shuffling as though her mother had handed the phone over, and Audra gasped as she heard her father's voice.

"Hi Audra. It's Dad. Just — agreeing with what your mother said." She fought the urge to laugh, even as tears spilled from her eyes down her cheeks. That had always been her father — useless with words, but quick to sign off on whatever her mother said. He meant it, though. She could tell from the feeling in his voice. If he'd disagreed, he'd have said so. "I love you very much, little bird," he said gruffly, and she felt her chest tighten at that old nickname. When she'd been little, he'd always pushed her on the tire swing in the backyard — she'd yelled at him to push her higher and higher, and he'd joked that she must be a bird, not a child, to be so determined to get up into the sky...

And then there was a beep, and a click, and a low battery warning. Her heart pounding, Audra reached out to switch the phone screen on, not wanting to drain the battery completely... and aware that she was making quite a spectacle of herself, tears running down her cheeks like this. "Sorry," she said quickly, wiping her eyes — and then Brian's arm was around her shoulders, holding her close as she felt her shoulders shake with sobs.

An apology had been the last thing she'd expected. All she'd wanted was to hear their voices again... and not only that; she'd received an apology, something she'd been longing to hear her entire life. She just wished she could get a message back to them, telling them she forgave them, that she loved them... and that she was happy.



The other three left the workshop, murmuring excuses, and she was left alone with Brian, standing by the generator and the now-silent phone. There was still a little light on its screen, indicating that it was steadily charging, but she didn't want to risk switching the screen on again until the battery had had time to charge up a little more. She couldn't help feeling a little silly for how emotional she'd gotten about the message... but as soon as she thought about it, she felt her eyes welling up with tears again, and Brian held her close as she shook again with another burst of sobs.

"This is so silly!" she gasped, fighting a strange urge to laugh. "It's a good thing... I'm so happy that I got to hear their voices, that they..." A lump rose in her throat. "They apologized. They were changing." She laughed again, and felt Brian wipe the tears from her cheeks. It was so good having him there, having his warm arms around her... "God, trust them to wait until the absolute last possible moment to let me be an adult. I just... I just wish I could tell them that I'm okay. That I'm happy, where I am."

"You are?" Brian smiled down at her, and she realized that the last time they'd talked about all this she'd been a little hesitant about whether she was happy to be here, stranded in the past with a whole crazy new world to learn about. "I'm glad to hear that."

"Yeah, me too." She sighed, wiping her face. "I wish my parents could meet you. They'd like you."

"I'm glad I got to hear their voices," he said, nodding at the phone. "You'd told me how those things work, but... well, seeing it happen is a different thing altogether. Fascinating."

"Oh, wait until I get *Candy Crush* working on it," she said, fighting the urge to laugh. He looked mystified, which only made her giggle more... and at the sound of her laughter, she heard the door swing open and the others come back in, clearly sensing that the need for privacy had passed. She smiled around at the group, knowing that she

probably still looked like she'd been crying — but she didn't care. These were her friends. She was safe here.

They headed home not long after, after a quick conversation about the plan regarding the phone. William and Karin would keep an eye on the generator, making sure it continued to charge the phone, and when it reached full charge, they'd give it to Fiona to bring back to the Keep to show people. Fiona was especially keen to share it with the coven, all of whom were very interested in the possibilities of having a piece of modern technology to use to help future time-stranded travelers feel more at home here... but first things first, it needed to charge. Based on the slow upward creep of the charge percentage, it would be a couple of days before it was ready... which gave them enough time to organize a meeting with the coven.

The next few days were tense, of course — especially for Brian, who was clearly rather unpopular among the people of the Keep. Audra comforted him where she could — but she was beginning to realize that being with him was putting her on the radar of the resentful servants who'd been taken advantage of by Duncan. Some of them saw her as a dupe, as a silly girl who was being misled by her lover, which was insulting enough... but yet more of them saw her as competition, as a rival who'd stolen their man away, and it was these women she felt the need to avoid as much as possible. She kept to herself, mostly, spending a lot of time reading in her room and journaling about the belated breakthrough she'd had with her parents. She'd once been told by a therapist that it was a good idea, when you were feeling conflicted about something, to write a letter without any intent to send it. She wrote a few to her parents... and though she knew she could never send them, it seemed to help, at least, to express her complex feelings, her frustration at how sheltered she'd been her whole life... and her gratitude, too, that they'd finally come around and seen the light... even if it had taken a huge fight and her traveling halfway across the world to make that happen.

Marianne came to her room in the middle of the afternoon a couple of days after the visit to the alchemist's cottage, her eyes alight and a smile on her lips, to inform her that they'd be meeting in the woods again.

Audra spent the rest of the afternoon looking forward to the meeting — the time seemed to drag on and on, and she wolfed down her dinner with one eye on the windows, waiting for the night to grow dark enough to conceal her passage out of the castle. Finally, night had fallen enough to conceal her, and she pulled her cloak around her shoulders before slipping down the stairs. Fiona was bringing the phone, she'd said — it would be great to have a good look, to assess just what materials they had to work with on the device, and what

elements needed cell towers and internet to work. She had a suspicion that *Candy Crush* wouldn't be an option...

The woods felt strange, this late at night... and she frowned a little. She'd been in the woods this late before, hadn't she? Why did it feel like she was being followed? Paranoia, probably, she decided, shaking her head. The conversation she'd had with Marianne about how important it was to keep Fiona's witchcraft a secret from the rest of the world, that must have put the idea into her head that they were being followed. She found her way to the clearing and smiled to see all four of the women already gathered, cloaks around their shoulders as they stood in the light of the half-moon above them. She knew there'd be no sky-clad dancing tonight... but part of her still hoped that maybe Marianne would change her mind about that...

They performed a brief ritual of meeting, holding hands as they sat cross-legged in the center of the clearing in a circle. Five was a good number, she thought, glancing around at the serious faces of the women with a warmth and love in her heart for them that hadn't been there quite so strongly the last time they'd met. Five points on a pentagram, right? There was something pleasing about it, something significant. Though of course, they may well welcome more members as the years went on and more time travelers were brought through to them. Seven would be nice, she thought with a grin. Even a full dozen...

"Now let's have a look at this phone," Delilah said once the ritual was complete, a broad grin on her face. The five of them took turns with the phone, which was fully charged as Fiona had said. Sure enough, most of the games that Audra had had installed required the internet to function, which was crushing... then again, games were probably not the most important use for the phone right now. She was delighted to discover that she'd downloaded a few of her college textbooks onto her phone to read on the go, and that they were still fully accessible... those, along with several thousand photos of her life and her trip, would be invaluable resources.

It was nice, looking back through her photos with her friends, too. They were all fascinated by what the photos showed, exclaiming with delight over old landmarks they remembered from their own time in the future... and she told them story after story about the people and places in the photos, enjoying reminiscing about her old life just as much as the rest of the coven was enjoying hearing about it. By the time the battery had reached seventy-five percent, the night was growing late, and Marianne cleared her throat, informing the group that they'd spend more time with the phone next time they met.

They walked back together... but something was wrong. All five of them could sense it — she caught Delilah and Fiona exchanging

worried glances and gave voice to her own unease. And it wasn't long before the source of the worry was made clear.

A woman emerged from the trees, abrupt enough to frighten them. She was an older lady, maybe in her forties or fifties, and clad in the uniform of a servant of the Keep. Audra could feel her heart pounding as a thousand questions came to her mind — how long had she been following them? Had she seen the phone, overheard their strange conversation about magic, witchcraft, and time travel? Was she going to tell anyone? The atmosphere was tense — but the woman's eyes were worried when she spoke, not fearful.

"My apologies for disturbing your gathering, ladies," she said, and there was nothing in her voice that suggested she had any inkling of what they'd actually been doing... almost pointedly so, Audra thought, giving the woman a curious look. "But I thought I'd best let you know... you were followed, out there. Not only tonight, but several weeks ago, too, when you were welcoming Miss Audra here." She gave Audra a respectful little nod... and Audra's stomach clenched.

"Followed?" Fiona looked alarmed. "By whom?"

Audra had a horrible feeling she knew what the woman was about to say. Sure enough, the servant sighed, shaking her head. "I can't rightly tell the difference between them, I'm afraid, my lady. But it was one of those terrible twins."

All four women turned to stare at Audra, who shut her eyes for a minute, feeling overwhelmed. "It was Duncan," she said, with all the calm she could muster. "Brian would never do that. Never."

"If he saw us —" Marianne's face was tight with anger, her green eyes blazing in her beautiful face. "This is incredibly serious, Audra."

They dismissed the servant, who bobbed a quick curtsy before turning and heading back to the Keep, just visible through the trees... but the five of them clearly had things to discuss before they returned to the Keep. "He must have been spying on us for quite some time," Fiona was saying, her jaw tight. "I can't believe this. I spoke up for them, damnit. I told Donal to give them a second chance, to let them back in here —"

"It wasn't Brian," Audra insisted, feeling hollow and foolish as she spoke. "I promise. I know him, I — I trust him. I love him." There was a pause when she spoke those words, and the other four women looked at her, mixed expressions of worry and sympathy on their faces.

"I know," Marianne said finally. "And Audra — I really want to believe that you're right. That it's Duncan, and not Brian, who's doing all of these unpleasant things."

"We need to find out for sure, one way or another," Fiona said, her voice steely. "Because whichever one of them has been spying on us..."

he is going to pay."

She had a hard time getting to sleep that night, once the five of them had returned to the Keep. All gatherings were suspended for the immediate future, at least until the matter of which twin had been spying on them could be put to rest — something that made her feel equal parts miserable and angry. What really bothered her, though, was the doubt that was beginning to creep in when she thought about all this. Could it really be all Duncan, this bad behavior, spying and womanizing and playing pranks? Or was she being stupid and gullible, believing Brian when he told her that he wasn't to blame? Was she just as big a fool as the rest of the women he'd been stringing along?

But she thought of the way he held her, the way he looked at her when they made love, the love in his eyes when he so much as glanced in her direction in the dining hall. That man... the man she'd gotten to know, the man she loved — he couldn't be responsible for all the awful things that had happened. He simply couldn't. And maybe it was stupid, and gullible, and naive — maybe she was setting herself up to be hurt — but as she tossed and turned in her bed late into the night, Audra could only come to one conclusion. She had to prove that Brian was a good man. And that might mean proving, once and for all, that Duncan wasn't. Either way, she needed to make up her mind. No more hedging her bets. She trusted Brian. She loved Brian.

And if she was wrong... well, she'd know about it soon enough.

She only got a few hours of sleep, in the end, and she felt bleary and out of sorts when she headed down for breakfast the next morning. The other coven members she saw looked similarly bleary, and they gave each other vague little smiles as they loaded their plates for breakfast. There was an edge to the air, a tension that she'd bleakly ascribed to the revelation last night... but no, it had spread much further than the coven, and Audra realized with a jolt that today was the day of Lord Weatherby's visit. In all the chaos and excitement of charging the phone — and then the awful revelation that their most

private rituals had been spied upon — she'd completely forgotten about the visit.

Lord Weatherby arrived mid-morning, a tight, prissy little expression on his face as he swept through the doors with Baldric at his side. The Laird was there to greet them, as were most of the folk of the castle, Brian and Audra included. She'd insisted on him staying with her the entire time, so that she could vouch for him being who he said he was. Weatherby made a point of loudly announcing that he'd left their horses in the paddock, because he didn't trust them to be safe in the stables here in the Keep — something that made Laird Donal's face tighten, though he maintained his civil expression.

The visit seemed to be going better than the last one, from what she could gather as the morning wore on. The beer was free of sawdust, the wine not fouled by vinegar — she and Brian ate at the Laird's table with the visitors, listening politely to the slightly strained conversation that was going on. Lord Weatherby was clearly very upset about the previous visit, but Fiona did an incredible job distracting him with praise and compliments — she clearly knew who she was dealing with here, and Audra had to hide a smile at how easily Lord Weatherby was fooled by her charming demeanour. Audra wasn't sure how Fiona managed so well, considering that Weatherby had once tried to force himself on her.

After their meal, they headed into the courtyard to have a look at the new stone tower that was being erected — it was close to complete, and Lord Weatherby grudgingly acknowledged that it was rather impressive, and that he may even like something similar installed at his own manor. Audra found herself trying to remember the structure of the walls of the manor in the future, whether or not Lord Weatherby had made good on his promise... but was distracted by sudden shouting from the gates.

Her heart sank as two men came running in — she recognized them as stable workers, and they had matching expressions of acute dismay that made her horribly suspicious that something had gone wrong. The Laird hastened over to them — but he couldn't stop Lord Weatherby from following, and from a distance, Audra could see by their changing expressions that something had gone terribly wrong. She and Brian moved closer. She was just grateful he was here, that Lord Weatherby would hopefully see that he'd had nothing to do with whatever had happened...

"— broken, you say?" Baldric was saying, his voice low. The stablemen were nodding.

"She's my prized mare," Lord Weatherby all but screeched, his face purpling as he wheeled on Laird Donal. "Donal, you promised me that there would be no more little accidents — now I hear that you can't

even keep a gate fastened on a paddock? My prized mare has broken her leg, MacClaran! What are you going to do about this? How am I supposed to ride home?"

Laird Donal gritted his teeth. "Lord Weatherby, I am terribly sorry. You are more than welcome to your pick of our stables —"

"Absolutely right," Weatherby said darkly, jabbing one finger into the Laird's chest. "To begin with, at least. Baldric, we're leaving."

"Yes, sir." Baldric's expression was carefully schooled, but the worry in his eyes was visible regardless, when his gaze flicked up to Audra and Brian. Unfortunately, Lord Weatherby had also spotted Brian, and his hard little eyes narrowed.

"You again," he spat. "I should have known you had something to do with this."

"Lord Weatherby, I can assure you that —"

"You and that wastrel brother of yours, no doubt, working in league. Well, I hope your foolish games were worth it. Laird Donal, you will expel these two men from the Keep, effective immediately, or you can consider diplomatic relations between our two houses at an end."

And with that, Lord Weatherby turned on his heel and swept off toward the gate. Baldric hesitated a moment longer, looking worriedly from Brian to Audra with an expression on his face that made her hopeful, briefly, that he might say something, might stand up for them, might try to change his Lord's mind... but then he made a tiny gesture, almost a shrug, and though there was an apologetic look on his face, he still turned and walked away, hastening after Lord Weatherby, who was now standing by the gates and shouting indignantly up at the guards to raise them faster, didn't they know who he was?

"Laird Donal," Brian started, his face blanched of all color. "You must believe that I had nothing to do with this —"

But Laird Donal's face was tight, his eyes blazing with fury, and even Fiona's hand on his arm didn't stop him from wheeling on Brian. "Do you have any idea what you've done here?" he demanded, voice low and taut. "Any idea how precarious relations with the English are? How close to war we are? Your foolish pranks —"

Audra felt her heart pounding in her chest, but she couldn't let Brian take the blame for this. Not again. Not when none of it was his fault — not just the horses getting out, but all of it. His bad reputation among the servants, in the village, the dispute with the blacksmith and the people at the tavern, the first visit with Weatherby... he'd done nothing wrong, ever, it was all Duncan and that was so obvious to her — why could nobody else see it? Why wasn't he defending himself?



"Laird Donal," she said, surprised by the force in her own voice. "It wasn't Brian. It was Duncan. All of this — all of the pranks and the unpleasantness and the womanizing — all of it was Duncan, using his brother's name."

But the look Donal gave her was pitiless, his eyes cold and his jaw tense as he drew himself up to his full, imposing height. "Maybe that's true," he said grimly. "And maybe it's not. Maybe you've had the wool pulled over your eyes, too. Maybe these cunning manipulators have drawn you into their little web the same way they've drawn in everyone else. Find Duncan," he added sharply, the barked order receiving nods of agreement from the men standing around him. "I'll need to see them both. Here."

It wasn't long before Duncan was found — he'd been down at the paddock, of course, just out of sight. Probably stirring up the horses to make them escape, one of the grooms was overheard muttering — but he was brought before Laird Donal in the courtyard with little ceremony. Brian had lapsed into a grim silence that made Audra despair that he wasn't even going to try to stand up for himself — and sure enough, when Laird Donal demanded an explanation for what had happened, it was Duncan who did all the talking. He all but confessed the crimes for the both of them, claiming that it had been a joke that had gotten out of hand, that Lord Weatherby had no sense of humor...

Audra was shocked. What was he doing? Why wasn't he trying to wriggle out of his punishment? Then she realized, looking at them both, the smug smile on Duncan's face, the numb dismay on Brian's. He didn't want to wriggle out of punishment — quite the opposite. What he wanted was to get caught... was for both of them to get kicked out of the castle. He wanted his brother all to himself again. All those angry looks she'd caught, the resentful attitude he'd had when Audra and Brian were getting to know each other, falling in love... this had been his plan all along. If only she'd seen it before. But it was too late now.

"Brian and Duncan MacClaran, you are exiled from the Keep and the surrounding lands, effective immediately," Laird Donal's voice boomed.

Audra felt shock race through her, an icy blast that left her feeling numb. She could feel Fiona's sympathetic eyes on her, but she couldn't bring herself to seek solace in her friend. All she felt was numb — numb, and beneath it, angry. Defiant, even. She couldn't let Duncan win... couldn't let him get away with what he was doing, with his determination to tear her and Brian apart. And before she knew it, she was hastening forward to take her place beside Brian, ignoring Duncan completely. There was a shocked gasp from the crowd, and

she heard Fiona calling her back — but she lifted her chin defiantly, knowing she was being reckless, but in that moment, she couldn't care. A quick glance over her shoulder showed her Brian's face, full of wonder, and Duncan's, twisted with rage.

"I'm going with them," she said loudly, narrowing her eyes as she squared up against Laird Donal. "Brian MacClaran is innocent of the crimes he's been accused of, and if he can't stay here, neither can I."

There was a long silence. For one moment, she thought she might just have called Donal's bluff... but then he sighed, and she felt her heart sink. "So be it," was all he said. "Be gone by sunset."

And just like that, he turned on his heels and strode away, back toward the Keep. The Keep that had taken her in and sheltered her when she was feeling at her lowest and most lost... the Keep that she'd gotten to know and love over the last few weeks, the Keep where she'd fallen in love with Brian and made a group of friends who were closer to her than anyone...

The Keep that was no longer her home.

She packed her few belongings in a daze, feeling utterly bereft.

Fiona and Marianne were with her, alternately helping and trying to change her mind... but an icy calm had come over her, a commitment to staying at Brian's side no matter what. He needed someone with him other than his brother, someone who wouldn't twist his mind, try to take everything that he had, destroy anything he could build for himself and make him think it was his fault... she knew who Duncan was now, well and truly. Knew how evil he was, how twisted, how toxic that sibling relationship was.

"I can't," she told Fiona finally, as she swung her satchel over her back. Marianne had brought her some riding clothes — men's clothes, she added, safer for the road — and she'd changed into them. It felt strange, to be wearing trousers after such a long time in skirts, but she was grateful for the gift. "I can't leave him by himself with his brother."

"I don't want you to go," Fiona said, tears in her eyes. "I'll talk to Donal, I'll — you don't have to go, Audra —"

"Yes, I do," she said softly, pulling her friend into a hug. "Thank you so much, for everything you've done for me." She took a deep breath. "Keep the phone, okay? Use it when other time travelers need it."

Fiona still looked torn... but there was nothing she could say to change her mind. Audra headed down to the courtyard, where Brian was waiting for her, sitting astride his horse with a wan smile on his handsome face. Duncan was already outside the gates, and the expression on his face when Audra and Brian came riding through the gate was absolutely mutinous.

"Great, an extra load for your horse," Duncan snapped, his blue eyes full of hatred. "You know you're dooming us, right, Audra? Dead weight," he snapped.

Brian defended her, raising his voice in a shout as they rode away

from the Keep... but all Audra could feel was numb and empty as they rode. She was with Brian, sitting in front of him on his horse with his arms around her, just like on that first day... but this time, they weren't heading toward the Keep, toward warmth and hearth and home. They were heading off into the darkness, the night air already chilling her through even her thick riding cloak.

They kept riding down the road, in silence for a little while... until Audra willed herself to speak, her voice croaking with repressed tears. "Where are we going?"

"The moors," Brian said, his voice hollow. "We've enough equipment to set up camp. Then we'll... we'll figure it out." This was clearly killing him. He'd barely turned around when they'd left the Keep, and she could tell he was forcing himself not to look back, for fear that it might undo him. His body was stiff and unresponsive behind her, and she could tell he was holding back tears. "We'll make a plan, Audra."

They rode longer in silence — silence, except for Duncan's occasional barbs about how much more quickly they could ride if Brian's horse didn't have the weight of two bodies on it. She didn't care. At this point, he could say whatever he wanted to her — she knew his game. She knew her enemy, now. There was nothing left to uncover. Not for her, anyway... though it wasn't long before Brian spoke, his voice sounding like it was coming from very far away.

"Duncan... tell me the truth. Did you do all that on purpose?"

"All what?" Duncan sounded irritable. "They've always hated us. They turned on us like they were bound to, just like they did all those years ago."

"Duncan, it's just you and I, now. You know as well as I do that I had nothing to do with any of your pranks, any of your womanizing. I haven't had eyes for any woman but Audra since I lost my wife. So I'll ask you again — did you incriminate me on purpose? Did you give my name, ruin my reputation, turn the villagers and the servants against me deliberately?"

"Don't be stupid," Duncan snapped. "You're lying. You whored around plenty. That's right, Audra," he added, his voice suddenly wheedling. "Your true love is a worse womanizer than I am. A different girl every night —"

"That's not true," Brian snapped, looking down at her for the first time since they'd left the Keep. "Audra, he's lying —"

"Of course he's lying," she said, squeezing his forearm to reassure him. "I trust you, Brian. I love you. I wouldn't be here if I didn't."

"I love you too," he breathed, and she almost reached up to kiss him — but for the fact that Duncan had swerved his horse deliberately into them, almost knocking her from the saddle completely.

"Disgusting," he snarled, his face purple with rage even with only the stars and moon to light it. "Brian, you've wasted enough time on this whore —"

"Don't you say another word about her," Brian snapped, his voice suddenly thicker and stronger than it had been in hours. Suddenly, he reined the horse to a stop. They were in the middle of nowhere, or thereabouts, and she could feel her heart pounding with anxiety. Duncan leapt down from his own horse, and the two brothers squared off for a moment — before she saw Duncan roll his eyes and step back, spitting on the ground as he did.

It was an uneasy camp that they made, out there on the moors in the dead of night. Building a fire was out of the question — it had been raining on and off all day, and there was precious little firewood to be found out here in the first place, let alone firewood that wasn't soaked through. So they tethered the horses to graze and set up a sad little camp, two bedrolls set up side by side against the wind with Audra sharing Brian's. Any pleasure at the feeling of his warm arms around her was quickly dulled by the unpleasant knowledge that Duncan was inches away from them, and it was only her exhaustion and misery that helped her fall into an uneasy sleep, troubled by dreams of dozens of identical men in pairs, beating the living hell out of each other...

"Wake up."

She blinked hard, disoriented and — she realized — freezing cold. She sat up at the sound of the hoarse whisper, blinking blearily. Brian was kneeling in front of her, his face full of worry — both bedrolls were empty, and she scanned the area for the other brother, fear clutching at her heart.

"Audra — we have to go. Right now. Duncan's going to kill us, I heard him muttering about it last night."

"Kill us?" She shook her head hard, trying to get her wits about her after a terrible night of sleep, her heart already pounding hard as the sick lurch of adrenalin took over her body.

"Us, or just you, or just me — does it matter? Come on," Brian said impatiently, pulling her to her feet. She stumbled a little and he steadied her roughly, his eyes full of impatience. "We have to go. He's getting the horses, making sure we can't escape — we have to go right now. Come on."

She fought a wild urge to laugh as Brian pulled her by the hand, into the thick, choking fog that had descended in the night. It was still dark, but there was the slightest gray tinge to the sky that suggested that dawn wasn't too far away... but she couldn't see a damn thing with the fog, even if they'd had a lantern or a torch to see by. The ground was uneven, choked with plant life, and she stumbled again

and again, trying to keep her footing with the pace he was setting. God, a few weeks ago she'd have given anything to be running away from Duncan with Brian at her side... but right now, she felt nothing but desperate and miserable.

"Hurry up," he growled again — and she groaned in frustration, yanking her hand out of his grip.

"I'm going as fast as I can, don't be so — Brian!" He'd grabbed her arm again, yanking her along, and she felt a sudden, awful suspicion blossom to life in her chest even as she looked intently at his face. "You're not Brian," she said, horror gripping her. God — how could she have been so stupid? How far had they come? He was laughing now, an ugly, terrifying sound — and she screamed at the top of her lungs, hoping against hope that Brian would hear them, wherever he was.

Duncan grabbed her and clapped a hand over her mouth, silencing her — she struggled furiously as he kept dragging her, kicking, and writhing, occasionally breaking away long enough to scream Brian's name. But it wasn't long before fresh fear went surging through her, making her weaken at the knees as she realized what Duncan's plan was, where he was dragging her — there, ahead of them in the fog, was the sudden abrupt end of the moor, a sheer cliff edge that dropped off into nothing.

"What?" she gasped, a distorted memory of her dream returning to her. "The sea —"

"Don't be stupid," Duncan snarled, shaking her hard. "The sea's miles from here. No, this is a much surer bet," he said, his voice dripping with scorn. "Little Annie went into the ocean, and I had to wait a few days to be sure she was dead and not washed up alive on some beach... but hurling you from this cliff? I'll be able to see your broken, bloodied body for myself on the rocks below."

"You killed her," she gasped, the revelation sudden and shocking... but at the same time, horribly, horribly obvious. "Of course you killed her. You hated her — you hate anything that Brian has that isn't you —"

"Enough from you," Duncan said, face twisting with fury as he struggled to drag her closer to the cliff's edge. "Or do I have to knock you out before I throw you? That's what I did to her," he added, voice ugly and mocking. "A quick blow to the back of the head... it was almost too easy. She looked so peaceful, lying there on the cliff's edge. Like a little doll. I almost had her again," he chuckled. "It was tempting, with her skirts all bunched up around her hips like that..."

"Again?" Maybe she could keep him talking, she thought dizzily, her mind racing as she tried her best not to let terror overcome her. Maybe if she kept him talking, it would give Brian enough time to find

them.

"Oh, yes. See, Annie was even more stupid than you," he said, eyes gleaming. This was a safe bet, she realized with a burst of dizzying hope flourishing in her chest. He liked bragging about his cruelty — maybe she could keep him talking... "She couldn't tell us apart at all... not until I'd had my way with her half a dozen times, at any rate. You should have seen her face when I told her she was a ruined woman, that she'd been cheating on her precious husband with none other than his brother..."

"That's rape," Audra said, her heart frozen with horror in her chest. "That's rape by deception, you scumbag —"

He struck her hard across the face, and she felt herself drop to her knees in the heather, the breath rushing out of her with shock. But something was happening. She heard Duncan swear in surprise — and then there was a strangled roar, and something came lunging out of the fog, something huge and powerful, something that took Duncan down and started beating the hell out of him.

Could it be? Was she hallucinating? It was Brian — his face unrecognizable, twisted with righteous fury and grief, tears streaming from his burning eyes as he drove his fists again and again into Duncan's face and torso — the brothers continued to struggle as Audra scrambled backwards, away from the edge of the cliff, eager to get the hell out of the way of this as soon as she could. She'd be no help to Brian, not right now — and besides, he seemed to have the upper hand. Duncan scrambled away, gained his feet, and turned on his brother — and the two squared off on the cliff's edge, the fog embracing both of their bodies as they gasped for breath.

"You killed her," Brian said levelly, his voice colder than Audra had ever heard it. "You — you raped her, and you killed her."

"She wasn't good enough for you," Duncan snarled, his face twisted. He'd never looked so ugly, so unhinged, so utterly insane. "Wasn't good enough for — for — you always get everything!" Suddenly, his voice was more like a scream than a growl, and he took an unsteady step toward Brian, who deflected a blow from him with ease. "You get everything, and I get nothing! So what if I took what I deserved now and again?" His voice turned low and soft, almost purring. "She was good, though. If what I did was rape, it was worth it for how good she felt. Maybe after I've knocked you out, I'll rape Audra, too —"

It happened in the blink of an eye. With a roar of rage that echoed through the mist and along the cliffside, Brian surged forwards and shoved his brother hard in the chest — and with an expression of mingled horror and fury frozen in place on his face, Duncan went flying back over the cliff... and disappeared from sight. She hoped

against hope that she wouldn't hear it — but a few seconds later, there came a dull, sickening thud from somewhere far, far below.

Brian dropped to his knees by the cliff's edge, weaving, unstable — and Audra ran forward to grab him and pull him back from the edge, heart pounding as he wrapped his arms around her, buried his face in her chest and sobbed. Audra held him close, her eyes fixed on the edge of the cliff, terrified somehow that Duncan would climb back over and attack them again. But as the sun rose and the mist dissipated, the two of them were still alone.

Duncan was dead. It was over.



They rode back on the same horse, despite the fact that they

could easily have ridden one each — it was a wordless decision. They both needed the comfort of touch, the warmth of each other's bodies. When the Keep rose up over the horizon, Audra felt such a strong sense of warmth and homecoming that she almost wept... but she felt her lover stiffen behind her, clearly wary of returning.

"They said I could come back whenever I wanted," she told him softly as they pulled over to the side of the road. They were riding Brian's horse — Duncan's horse was carrying the gear. "So — I'll go in, tell them what happened, come back to get you."

"What if —"

"I'll tell them what happened and come back to get you," she repeated, firmly, squeezing his hands meaningfully. "I'm not taking no for an answer, Brian."

And to her acute relief, that was exactly what happened. She walked up the road to the Keep by herself, shivering a little in the early morning air — and when the guards saw her walking in alone, they hurried to let her through the gates. It was Fiona who met her in the courtyard, her face wreathed with relief and fear — and when Audra told her the story of what had happened the night before, she threw her arms around her and held her close. Then she sent the guards to fetch Brian and bring him to the Keep.

The Laird was wary, of course, of letting him back into the Keep after everything that had happened... but Fiona made it clear, in her way, that this was going ahead whether he wanted it to or not. Begrudgingly, he allowed Brian back into the Keep on a temporary basis — and that night over dinner, once Brian had had the opportunity to rest a little in Audra's quarters — his own had already been cleared out he and the Laird dined together. Audra sat with the coven, all of whom were delighted to have her back... but it was hard for her to be present with them. She kept turning around to check on

how the conversation was going, trying to figure out what was happening from what she could see of their facial expressions... and finally, she headed up to bed, unable to stand the suspense.

There was a soft tapping on her door an hour later. Brian was there, a tremulous smile on his face, and though he still looked dejected and miserable, he shrugged his shoulders and gave her a smile. Laird Donal had believed him — believed what he'd told him about his brother, about what he'd revealed on the cliffside. Audra's word counted for something too, of course, as did Fiona's and the rest of the women's — it seemed that they did believe Audra after all, that the man she loved wasn't the monster his brother had been trying to make out that he was. And so it was that the two of them were welcomed back to the Keep... though with the understandable provision that if any trouble was started again, Brian would be gone for good this time. And he was to send a formal and long-winded apology to Lord Weatherby, of course, who would likely take some coaxing into forgiving the MacClarans for what Duncan had done.

And just like that, it was over. It felt eerie, to wander around the Keep knowing that for the rest of their lives, she'd never glimpse Duncan and mistake him for Brian again. The next day, a group of guards were sent out to the cliff where Duncan had fallen to his death, and a funeral was organized for the man. There was considerable discussion over whether Duncan ought to be buried in the MacClaran graveyard. He was a member of the family, after all... but his crimes had been truly heinous. In the end, it was left up to Brian to decide... and after an hour's deep conversation with Audra, he decided that Duncan would be given a true and proper burial... but in the village, not in the MacClaran family plot.

They attended the service together, hand in hand. It was a fittingly bleak, gray day, with a few quick words spoken by the priest over the coffin before the body was buried. Brian declined to say anything when asked, simply shaking his head, his face pale and drawn. Later, Audra asked him about it.

"I don't need to speak any remembrances out loud," he said simply, shrugging his shoulders. "My face will be a resemblance as long as I live."

And with that, it was all over. The days turned into weeks, as both Brian and Audra began to recover from the trauma of what they'd been through. She spent time with her friends, with her coven, settling back into the life of the castle... and she and Brian grew ever closer, though he was still more quiet than he'd been when they met.

"It's like half of me is missing," he confided in her one day, his blue eyes troubled. "As though I'm walking around as half a person."

"You're not half a person," she told him firmly, wrapping her arms

around him where they were lying together in the bed in his chambers. They'd all but moved in together, ignoring the gossip of the servants and folk of the Keep — at this point, Audra had had plenty of experience with ignoring gossip though she had noticed, to her great relief, that the rumors of Brian being a womanizing bastard seemed to have died with Duncan. She had a suspicion that Fiona had had something to do with that. "You're a full person. The person I love."

"I know it's foolish to be grieving him like this," Brian said with a frown. "My brother was... he was a monster. The things he admitted to... the way I heard him speak to you... what he did to Annie... I hate that I feel sad. I hate that I miss him, sometimes."

"It makes perfect sense to miss him," she told him firmly. "The things he did — they were awful, yes, but he was your brother. You weren't wrong to love him. He was wrong to betray you like that."

Brian nodded, gave her a half-smile... but she knew that this would be a difficult subject for him for a long, long time. Grief was tricky like that. In a way, she was still grieving her old life, her family, her friends back home... the two of them had a great deal of healing to do. Maybe that was why they spent so much time making love in his chambers — for comfort as much as anything, as a physical way of reassuring each other that they were loved, that they were safe, that they were cared for. That there was still some joy in the world, despite all the horrors that had taken place.

And when he asked her to marry him, it was the most natural thing in the world to say yes.

The ceremony was small — a few representatives from the MacClaran side, his groomsmen in splendid tartan, dressed up for a formal occasion, and her own coven, with Fiona a smiling maid of honor and Marianne, Delilah, and Helena her bridesmaids. They were wed in the forest — they'd considered the Keep, but there were too many memories bound up in that place, things that reminded them both of Duncan. And it was beautiful, beneath the trees, Laird Donal conducting the ceremony as he bound their hands together and spoke the words that would unite them in matrimony for the rest of time. Part of the ceremony was in Gaelic, a language she'd heard only in passing and found fascinating — Brian murmured a translation to her as the Laird spoke the words, and she smiled her gratitude, squeezing his hands in hers. Helena and Delilah both cried — she fought the urge to giggle as she saw Helena trying to hold back her tears. Marianne and Fiona, for their part, simply smiled at her — and she knew that her friends knew how she felt, the love and peace that she'd found with this man whom she'd been destined to fall for, ever since that strange day so long ago, when he'd found her by the side of the road...

It was strange to think about how happy she felt, she realized as they walked back toward the Keep after the ceremony, her husband's arm around her shoulders and a soft smile dancing across his handsome face. That smile was beginning to grow, as the weeks wore on and the sharp edges of his grief softened... she could sense that he was slowly coming back to the world, becoming accustomed to who he was without his brother. The two of them had a bright and beautiful future ahead of them. The clouds of grief would never truly clear, of course. They'd both suffered tremendous loss in their short lives — she'd lost her parents and her whole life back home, and he'd lost his brother, his closest friend and confidante... not to mention his first wife.

But they were together, that was the important thing. They had each other — they knew each other, knew they had an ally in their corner, someone they could love and trust for the rest of their lives. And no matter what subsequent tragedies might come; she knew that her husband would never leave her side. That the two of them would fight for each other for the rest of their lives together — that they'd always have one another, to keep each other safe and bring each other joy and comfort, every day and night from here on out.



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## About Rebecca Preston

Rebecca lives in New York City with her dog. She loves sweet love stories with great characters. She loves traveling the world and experiencing new cities and cultures. Jane Austen is her favorite author.

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